# ASHLEY CARTER

# AGAINST ALL GODS

Star

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## A UNIQUE INSIGHT INTO THE OVERWHELMING PASSIONS OF GREAT MEN – AND THEIR WOMEN.

The Suez Canal: 88 miles long and 260 feet wide, hacked by hand through the sun-baked Egyptian desert – a spectacular symbol of French power created by the untiring commitment and vision of just one man, Vicomte Ferdinand De Lesseps. Single-handed he faced seemingly impossible odds – the ravages of nature, the perfidy of the ruling Pashas, the opposition of this own Emperor.

But for Tony Hamilton, English Consular Official and De Lesseps' political enemy, the problems are more personal... Torn by his admiration for the indestructible Frenchman, he is further distracted from his patriotic duty by the bewitching seventeen-year-old Oriana Ducelle, whose reckless emotion is more than a match for Tony's reluctant propriety. Among the alien sands their passion burns with a white-hot heat...

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'There are those who would stop us,' he said. 'But we will not be stopped. There are those who would return this desert to the jackals and the lizards, but we will beat them all at their own game. Eh, Oriana? Won't we, Oriana?'

But his most devoted disciple, for what must have been the first time, was not listening to him.

Oriana was staring at me, almost as if transfixed.

I glanced at the young girl – fresh, dewy-eyed, naive, open-hearted, direct, and still in her teens – and I saw in her honest gaze something I had not encountered to my knowledge, in the last twenty years. She couldn't take her eyes off me, and she didn't give a damn in that moment who knew it. She stared so intensely and so warmly, in fact, that I felt a slow, heated flush creep upward from my own jawline to my temples.

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Ashley Carter

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To the memory of
Sir Avylon Austin Anthony Hamilton
(1824 – 1900) whom
*most* people called Tony,
this fictional account of an historical
event is affectionately dedicated.

# *Author's Note*

WHEN I WAS in London last year – one of the loveliest Junes in the history of that magnificent old city – I mentioned to my British-rights agent that I planned to write a novel on the Suez Canal, along the lines of my 1979 narrative, PANAMA, which had earned a silver medal as 'best fiction based on fact.'

He said this was a coincidence as he had only recently arranged for the publication of the diplomatic-career remembrances of Sir Avylon Austin Anthony Hamilton (1824-1900) whom *most* people called 'Tony'.

Tony, he said, had been in Her Majesty's consular service most of his adult life, serving as under-secretary to the Turkish government at Alexandria, and later, as Consul General, in the Egyptian area. Sir AAA Hamilton had abruptly resigned from the consular service immediately after the Suez Canal was finally opened to vehicular traffic. Tony's family had prevented publication of his memoirs until eighty years after his death.

My agent further added that, because of certain, and at times, libellous tones in an otherwise extremely decorous accounting of his career, the entire sections dealing with Sir Anthony Hamilton's extraordinary involvement in British, French and Egyptian affairs during the prolonged construction years of the Suez Canal – with the stressed accent on affairs – these total blocks of his memoirs had been excised from the published corpus of his voluminous recollections. This was done, he said, to avoid embarrassment, not only to Her Majesty's Government, but to the revered memories of certain hallowed historical figures. Sir Tony had not seen them as history would, and he was, among other things, an outspoken man, quite brutally

honest once freed from the rigidity of the diplomatic disciplines.

'I want you to read these excised portions,' my agent said. 'They will offer you insights into the building of the Suez – and England's ambivalent role in it – which you might well not gather from more academic sources. Of course, you wouldn't care to *use* the materials as Sir Anthony wrote them – '

'Oh, of course not,' I said, turning my head to hide the way my eyes flashed in eager anticipation. Think of it! Actual eyewitness accounts by active participants in the project. It was like reaching back into history and bringing up writhing, bleeding, struggling beings. I realised my friend had been speaking for some moments and I had missed all of what he'd said.

' – not for publication, of course, but for insights and unusual and intimate glimpses of famous men – and some of their women – I think you'll find his papers invaluable.' He laughed. 'Sir Anthony tells a totally irreverent and unique version of the hacking out of that canal across the Isthmus of Suez. Unique. Quite. Yes. That's why we decided we couldn't allow this section to be published, of course.'

'Of course,' I said.

*Part One*

# ISMAILIA, 1863

# I

DE LESSEPS BOUNDED up the broken incline toward me. He strode, smiling, and not at all like the defeated fanatic I expected to find in the midst of ruin, but like some Phoenix rising from the ashes, ignoring the savage heat, the stinging flies, the sweat, the destruction and the terrified workers crouching in his great shadow.

'Tony! My dear Tony.' He thrust out his arms and clutched me to him as if I were his dearest friend and not one who cordially hated his guts and, incidentally, represented a government inimical to him and all his works and dreams and fantasies. *'Mon dieu!* I knew you'd come. I knew it.'

Honesty compelled me to say, at least, 'I was ordered here, Vicomte.'

'Of course you were. But I knew – aside from that – that you would come. On your own. I counted on your support.' He laughed and clapped his stout arm about my shoulder. 'As I have counted on it from the first, my dear old friend.'

I stared at him, incredulous. He had not changed in four years. If anything, in fact, he looked younger, ruddier, more vigorous than I remembered. He looked, for God's sake, as if the desert suns, the adversities and even the pressures and failures and perils, reinvigorated, palliated and restored him and his unconquerable determination.

He exuded confidence and enthusiasm in the very site of cataclysm. If I had not known him to be at least fifty-eight years old, I would have believed him a robust, youthful forty-five, but not one day more.

I had looked forward with some dread to seeing him after I'd heard about the catastrophic destruction of two years' labour in the desert. I knew what the Canal across the Isthmus of Suez meant to De Lesseps. Other men have their

dreams, ambitions, greeds and fantasies, De Lesseps was enmeshed in an obsession. Often in the past days I'd thought about him, pouring his life's blood into this arid land, and the way it repaid him by chewing him up and spitting him out amid ruin, cholera and dysentery. I thought him battered by the furies, older than when I'd first met him in Alexandria nine years ago. I'd been thirty years old at that time and to my youthful eyes, he seemed mature. I'd expected to find him here age-peeled and clawed by time. After all, he was by now well into his seven ages, and in even the ordinary ageing process, it was a time for the taming of the blood, and plainly he had been hurled into the hole beyond hell here at Ismailia. But none of this was true. While I felt the touch of time at thirty-nine, he looked heartier and younger than ever, untouched even by total and terminal calamity.

For two reasons, I should have felt a sense of triumph in this scene of incredible destruction. First, as representative of Her Majesty's government, I was, by bureaucratic directive, unalterably opposed to French expansionism in the Middle East and of its colossal symbol, De Lessep's canal from Port Said across the Isthmus to Suez and the Red Sea. But I drew small satisfaction in seeing a gigantic symbol reduced to a jagged scar on the ugly face of this hot land.

My second reason for a feeling of victory in Vicomte De Lessep's defeat was more personal and yet probably far more vital and compelling. I had disliked Ferdinand Marie (Vicomte) De Lesseps intensely the first time I met him. By the time I got to know him well, I despised him ardently. This had nothing to do with the fact that we were on opposite sides of ideological and political parapets, divided by nationalistic desires, ambitions and prejudices. No, I detested him for his arrogance, his mystical sense of his own cosmic worth, his calm certainty of his fated rendezvous with destiny, his vainglory, his pomposity, his totally humourless dignity, and his unblushing acceptance – damn it, even his implicit anticipation – of the deference of kings. All of these traits, present in the corpus of De Lesseps by the gramme to every pound, all turned my anus to clabber as we boys used to say in the third form.

When De Lesseps said to me, at our first meeting, 'I'm going to repair a mistake God made out here. I'm going to put in a canal where He should have put a waterway,' one could have thought him joking. But he was not. He was deadly serious. God *had* made a mistake. Luckily, God had Ferdinand Marie De Lesseps to correct and amend at least *one* of His errors.

From the first, as you will be made to see by my factual recording of events, I found De Lesseps haughty, insolent, domineering, arbitrary, stubborn beyond belief, and unabashed about it all. This is not to suggest there are not many Frenchmen who view the rest of humanity in amused condescension, but in most of them there is this secret, saving grace which De Lesseps entirely lacked – amusement and self-awareness. Frenchmen delight and captivate us because most conceal their innate and inbred sense of superiority under devastating Gallic charm. De Lesseps had no Gallic charm; he must have hurried off from heaven without it, so anxious was he to amend the ills of a misbegotten world. He was in fact, so inimical that I had physically that day on the hotel veranda to restrain my pit bulls from attacking him on first sight and scent.

However, in the nine turbulent years of our acquaintance across that unbridgeable Channel, I had come to know him to be a man of great personal power, intellect, influence and with the perseverance of the devil himself. It has never been one of my divertissements to see the mighty hauled low. And after twenty very odd years in the Consular service I'd learned that the mightiest men at close range expose sprouting nostril hairs.

Now, on this battered hillside, De Lesseps grabbed my arm and propelled me toward one of the lone buildings which remained standing, if not intact. 'Come, my dear friend,' De Lesseps said. 'How good it is to see you. You come like an augury of good fortune amidst evil. We work for mankind, you and I, eh?' He said all this with a straight face, I swear to you, because in his great heart he believed it. 'Come, we'll have Ibrahim fetch tea for you and claret and cigar for me. I believe the best way to avenge ourselves against capricious gods is to go on living well, even in adversity, eh, old friend?'

'Oh? Is Ibrahim still with you?' I said, for want of words. 'In nine years he hasn't found anyone of greater stature to leach upon?'

He shrugged. 'Of course he hasn't.'

We went up on the water-ravaged veranda of the house and I glanced again at De Lesseps, as if to assure myself that I was not somehow missing the ravages of defeat and time. Though De Lesseps had long ago reached that age when physical deterioration ordinarily decays the frail fabrics of the vulnerable human corpus, he defied the gods from inside as well as out. He still carried himself well, with that ground-covering stride, his leonine head unbowed, his bushy mane of hair, graying, but still thick and luxuriant, his florid, smiling face almost unlined, unravaged by the pitiless sun. He actually looked as if he *were* living well. This was most incredible because the last time I'd seen him, he'd truly owned the world, or at least this region of it, and he'd strode, master of his own destiny and that of millions of beings, tax-paying, hungering or yet unborn.

The house was rough and plain, built many years earlier to house some French official in those evil days when Ismailia was merely a water stop for the camel caravans between Port Said and the Suez. The square old provincial house had been built of that hard blue clay and mudstone, with a blackened roof of Cedar shakes transported across land from Lebanon. Formerly De Lessep's residence, the place now served many purposes, office, commissary, hospital, salon, retreat and asylum for the insane.

I watched Ibrahim come running and bowing when De Lesseps and his guest, so far unrecognised, a blur in the blinding sunlight, approached the overhung veranda. When Ibrahim recognised me, he was unable to meet my amused gaze and this pleased me because it demonstrated at least that he did have a conscience, a fact which until this moment I had not suspected. He just kept bowing and smiling and arranging plates and glasses and cups and saucers and silverware on a linen covered round, small table between two wicker chairs where De Lesseps and I sat. Ibrahim had not changed very much; he looked more dehydrated by desert suns than ever, his eyes were blacker and his nose

larger, if possible. So far as I could see, Ibrahim's sole means of release and pleasure was in serving his master. He appeared to have no lovers, either male or female. His master's existence was his own entire existence – his master's croissants and coffee when he wakened at dawn, his master's breakfast of figs and eggs and oranges, his luncheon and his dinner, served in formality every night, his master's claret and his cigars. His skinny body looked as if it were nourished only on dates and goat's milk. He had learned to speak French as if it were an Arabic dialect, and he carefully used it only in the august presence of his master as if it were his humble gift to the great man.

When Ibrahim fetched my tea, made of thrice-boiled water, and without lemon, cream or sugar, he wore a fresh abba and still smiled and bowed without looking me in the face. He looked drier and skinnier and darker than ever in that white cotton sleeveless outer garment which resembled a sack with openings for head and arms, but was the universally popular garb among Arabs.

I sat in this stench and silence of death and watched De Lesseps suck on his cigar and sip at his claret as he talked about the people he admired, those dedicated beings who since earliest recorded Egyptian history had fought the withering hostility of this desert, often dying for what they hoped to drag from its bowels. 'We'll make a garden yet of Gaza,' he said.

'It looks to me as if you are finally and definitely finished out here,' I said.

'Oh, no. We won't quit. There should be a canal across the Suez and there will be.'

I spoke with hard practicality if in a gentle tone. 'I hear rumours that this project has almost bankrupted the Second Empire.'

He shrugged. 'Perhaps my programme is too large for any one country. Perhaps we shall have to allow other nations to join our crusade, eh?'

'If you mean England, I can tell you, Her Majesty is as adamant against your canal as ever.'

He smiled. 'We fear what we don't know. Don't understand. We can make them see. If you can get their ear for me, I promise you their hearts.'

'Even if it were possible, you have little left to offer.'

'What you see, dear boy, is not the end of anything. Right now we are merely holding against the gods, that's true. But I am one who can lick honey from thorns. I knew from the beginning that if you are going to work here in this desert, you must be tougher than the way of Isthmus life. It's that simple. We'll regroup, with new financing, and move forward again. I promise you that.'

Suddenly, he leaned forward in his chair and stared towards the caravan which had brought me north from Suez. He smiled. 'I knew there was something lacking in your company. Have you come all this way without your pit bulls?'

'I was ordered to travel swiftly.'

'Ah, yes. Those pit bulls of yours and I. We fight to the death. We get hold of something and we don't let go. I always admired those animals though they certainly never liked me. The pit bulls and I have much in common.'

Yes, I thought, you're all three sons of bitches.

The site at Ismailia was a place of sickening desolation, pestilence and destruction, as if some mindless god, tired of playing in the hot sands, had crushed machinery like toys in his fist and squeezed human beings as though they were cheap dolls and then tossed the litter and refuse across the battered face of the plain.

Sometimes, even now, I return in recurring nightmare to Ismailia and to that stunning ruin of the canal, its 28-foot bed cratered and savaged, a rubble of rock and boulder and displaced earth.

The stench of death and the fetid odour of human failure rose on desert heat waves like the smell of infection. Machinery lay ravaged beyond repair. Bloated corpses of slain workers reeked in the polluted channel, sprawled on the banks and walls and studs of the shattered concourse. Along the jagged hillocks monstrous iron cranes hovered, precarious, winch chains dangling fron long giraffe necks with evil-looking hooks, over shadowed black pits.

Swarms of strangely silent and withdrawn men, in every manner of Mid-Eastern dress and Mediterranean flesh tone,

gathered in unmatched colours, clambered along the channel banks or staggered up her sides. Far beyond them, the long canal glittered like purpled suppuration contaminated with virulent reds and capped with scummy silver stria on its molten surface. And the eternal desert stretched away, vast and sullen, like the inescapable threat of death itself, with sun-glazed flats and hazy dunes.

The labourers remained on worksites only as long as their European supervisors stood over them, cursing and threatening. A feverish and shrill babble of Arabic tongues rose in counterpoint against the profane shouts of unheeding Caucasian foremen. Their shouting, passing unheeded over the hearts of the workers, floated out to wander homeless upon the heartless desert.

The mind-altering shock of the abrupt flash flooding and the terror of violent death by drowning had left the surviving labourers apathetic and withdrawn. Most were weak now from hunger and exposure and the fearful effects of the pitiless sun. They huddled like ravaged inhabitants of a violated city in the midst of disaster. They moved and spoke and existed in a daze.

As long as foremen stood over them, they would work and chip at rocks in the pits and craters, and then abruptly, unwatched, they would cease and steal away up the incline to the stingy shade of a stunted sycamore tree.

The knot of wrokers gathered beneath the sycamore tree talked dazedly for a while and then fell silent, staring across the promontory toward where De Lesseps and I sat on the porch. De Lesseps said they had been like this for more than a week, chattering and talking almost mindlessly and then as unaccountably falling into silence. During these long silences they simply stared vacantly into space, then, without reason they gibbered and chattered again.

'I've told them – at least a hundred times – that they are safe now from the rains and floods and storms and whatever else happened here. But they watch their fellows die and they think they are not safe from death in this place.'

With the passing of each day all week their tension intensified. It was not only the death and destruction and

the unbearable heat that took its toll of nerves and minds, but the terror of dying, of dysentery and cholera and poisoning and, they insisted, dynamite. The terror spread like a virus through the whole native workforce; one saw in their faces that they would have run away into the desert, but for the desperate fears of the unknown. It was like contagion passed unawares among neighbours. 'You can feel their tension all about you,' De Lesseps said, shaking his head. 'There are times when it seems you can almost touch it.'

In the sun-dazzled silence of afternoon, the screaming of the jackals began and brought hackles standing along the nape of your neck. The yellow canines crept as close to the edge of the shattered worksite as they dared, waiting for the shroud of darkness that would allow them to creep in and eat at the unburied dead and the carrion and unburned refuse. Vultures sailed high wind drafts against the cloudless sky. But these buzzards would flock in soon after daybreak, ugly masses of them, leaving behind white bones picked clean, and returning awkward, bloody-beaked and sated to thorn covered trees, gray and asphyxiated with their droppings, or to crouch in fetid-smelling caverns.

I watched those natives still at work and it seemed to me they were accomplishing nothing, simply going through motions until they could sneak away to the sycamore tree.

De Lesseps caught the direction of my gaze and seemed to follow the skein of my thoughts. 'It's hard,' he said, 'to get these people to work under the best of conditions. They have a total unconcern for time. They are extremely relaxed, living for *Bukra fil mishmish* – tomorrow when the apricots bloom. But it is more than that now. The calamity has left them lethargic, sluggish, in a torpor. They are superstitious and they are suspicious. They give nature only part of the credit for the ruin that befell us there – and they wait for that terror to strike again.'

He spread his hands, staring at the sullen group under the sycamore tree. After the storm, he said, he had set them to scraping and digging and hacking at the stony earth with picks and shovels because the heavy machinery was useless. They accomplished little, but he achieved his goal. He kept

them busy. 'I want them to believe we shall go on working,' he said. 'Because we shall. I don't want them to think we are finished, because we are not. We are only delayed. If I can keep them working – even at make-work – I can make them believe this.'

From where De Lesseps and I sat on the veranda, we could see a sandstorm which blurred the horizon toward Sinai, so distant it appeared impersonal and irrelevant, far across a desert which stretched out on all sides into the far and unreachable silences of that sleeping and dangerous land.

European engineers converged upon us, singly, and from all corners of the devastated project, but with the same repeated complaints which went on endlessly, like some simple repetitive melody. To my ear, each report was identical, but to each De Lesseps gave full, grave and undivided attention.

Most of the engineers spoke of the complete slowdown and indolence of the Arabic workers. Mougel, a stout, troubled man, with graying hair, sweated shirt and rimless glasses precarious on his hawk nose, arrived first.

'They simply no longer do what we tell them to do,' Mougel said.

'They have always been a passive people,' De Lesseps suggested in a mild tone. One would not have believed he sat in the dead centre of ruin, surrounded by baying jackals.

'It is more than that,' Mougel said. 'They have begun to stop whatever they are doing now to pray. Five times a day they now drop everything, face towards Mecca and begin their prayers.'

'They are a religious people. Moslems take their religion far more seriously than we westerners do.'

Mougel shook his head. 'They never did this before.'

'They never lived in terror before.'

'No. It is far more serious. You must see it, Vicomte. They never stopped five times a day for prayers when things were going well. They are protesting. They are striking against you.'

De Lesseps invited Mougel to have a glass of wine and when Ibrahim brought the tumbler, Mougel sat on the edge

of the porch, bracing his booted leg on the stone step. He sipped at the wine and stared moodily toward the chattering group under the sycamore.

De Lesseps introduced me to Mougel with a show of pride. 'A man is not so much what he can do himself, but in his wisdom in choosing the right men to carry out his works. I especially pride myself upon Mougel. He has built important hydraulic works in Egypt.'

'The Viceroy loves to build bridges and dams and water systems,' Mougel said with a faint smile.

'Mougel is the man who answered the most important question posed by the canal project – how to reconcile the extreme tidal variances at the entrances from the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.' He laughed. 'Mougel's surveys made liars of topographers, geologists and scientists since antiquity. Mougel's opinions are always vital to me in making any decision.'

'You are very kind, sir.' Mougel said. It was clear that the engineer idolised the Vicomte. I sighed. What did it matter? After all Mougel was French-Copt, and behind those thick-lensed glasses, probably half blind.

The Engineer Linant who joined us next was another package, entirely. He was almost as thin as the Egyptian labourers, and his skin was burned the colour of reheated coffee by the blaze of desert suns.

Linant did not address the matter of the recalcitrant labourers. He tried to smile towards me, but he was deeply troubled. He said, 'I have come directly from the survey office, Vicomte. The papers we were able to salvage after the flood destroyed the files are of little use. We tried to read the blueprints, but they are useless, badly damaged by water.'

'The blueprints are safe,' De Lesseps replied in a calm, paternalistic tone.

'How can this be, Vicomte?' Linant shook his head. 'I just came from them. They are marked, badly marked by water. They are destroyed for all practical purposes.'

'No.' De Lesseps sat forward. 'The blueprints are here,' he said. He did not tap his temples, instead he struck at his heart with his doubled fist. This was the kind of melodrama

hissed off the Soho stages, but it was drunk in here with great draughts of adulation.

I took a deep sip of hot tea and swallowed back my urge to laughter. My God, he was incredible.

De Lesseps said, 'If Mougel is my good right arm, then Linant must be my right hand. I'd be lost without either of them. I can tell you now that when I was choosing men to execute our plans, I was advised by the Viceroy himself to take Linant only. I thought at first the *wali* wanted to keep Mougel to build his bridges and viaducts, but no, the Pacha warned me that Mougel and Linant would never agree, on anything. But this did not frighten me. On projects of such magnitude and importance as this, I certainly prefer to have two opinions, even if they differ.'

'It is only that Linant and I approach every problem from divergent angles,' Mougel said in careful and polite English so that I would not feel excluded. It was like this every time I addressed either Linant or Mougel. I spoke to them in French and they replied politely in English, speaking slowly and enunciating clearly as if I were slightly deaf.

De Lesseps waved his arm as if he could actually reach from the ruins of El Dar El Beda to the Dakhla Oasis. 'I tell you proudly and without overestimation, Linant is not only a brilliant engineer, he knows the topography of this whole country as few living men know it. He has made maps and studied the geology in the best arena of all, right on the spot. Moreover, the entire system of canals of Egypt is familiar to him. No one can be more competent than Linant to deal with all matters relating to the inland portion of the canal. And –' De Lesseps added with a broad smile as a third engineer joined us, 'at those times when Linant and Mougel are in total disagreement I can always turn to my incomparable Ducelle. Ducelle knows little more about Egypt than the ordinary lay person, but he knows engineering of every kind, he has worked around the world and under every condition.'

'We must get them back to work. And we must keep them working,' Ducelle said after he had acknowledged De Lesseps' glowing introduction to me. Ducelle looked to be in his forties, balding, but about him hung the aura of a man

who has in his youth been considered extremely handsome. He was not more than middle height, but his chest was thick, his shoulders wide and straight and he tapered down to slender hips. His features were regular, his profile almost perfect in form and measurement, his eyes large and black and smiling.

'They won't work,' Mougel said. 'They are slowing down.'

'They have only one pace,' Ducelle said with a smile. 'And that is slow.'

'They are refusing to work,' Mougel said. 'It is my firm belief that we cannot force them back even to their former torpid industry.'

'And even if we could,' Linant said, 'we face overwhelming delays because all blueprints and designs must be reproduced. The costs, the delays, the overruns, the destruction to be removed before any construction can be renewed make any hope for progress impractical and impossible.

'It would be costly,' Mougel said. 'But of course it can be done.'

'Of course it can,' De Lesseps said. 'I have no intention of abandoning this project. I would as soon give up my own life. My life, my fortune, my honour, and the very future of my nation are at stake here.'

The forward progress of any West End melodrama would here have been briefly interrupted by applause for a heartfelt if slightly exaggerated performance. But De Lesseps' engineers took the great man as seriously as he took himself. He was certainly the king of these beasts.

'If we are to continue – and I know somehow under your leadership, Vicomte, we shall start anew,' Ducelle said, 'we must without delay force these rascals back to work, and keep them working around the clock, in shifts.'

'You must know there is damn little we can accomplish,' Linant said, 'without blueprints, without heavy machinery.'

'We can let these workers see that we are in charge here,' Ducelle said. 'That when we give an order we expect it to be obeyed. We must let them see that we have been temporarily halted by an act of nature and not as they superstitiously

believe by supernatural mischief and secret intervention of hostile nations.'

'And how do you expect to accomplish all that, crippled as we are?' Linant inquired. He accepted a glass of port from Ibrahim and drank it off in one long, inattentive gulp.

'There are many ways,' Ducelle said. 'With the Vicomte's permission I would suggest one very strongly.'

'Please,' De Lesseps said. 'We are always anxious for your opinions and suggestions, my dear Ducelle.'

'Put them to work burying the dead.'

'You know damned well those superstitious men would never touch those infected bodies.' Mougel shook his head.

'They must be made to do it,' Ducelle said. 'They must be made to see it must be done. Perhaps by example. As the refuse must be burned and the sick tended.' De Lesseps stared at Ducelle a moment with a faint smile of approval pulling at the muscles of his grave face. Then he got up. He arose from the chair with some effort. Watching him, I thought at last I'd detected signs of advancing age. But I was wrong. I learned from Ducelle that immediately before my arrival De Lesseps had not stopped working for sixty eternal hours. He had been everywhere, all things to all men, in the shops, the makeshift hospital, the shattered barracks where the suspicious and superstitious natives huddled. Cholera stalked in the wake of the flood. And all the men on duty and caught in the path of the deluge had died from infection, drowning, gangrene or terror. De Lesseps was their calming agent, their father, their male nurse, their confessor, all the while he struggled to salvage his project from abandonment.

'I agree with you Ducelle,' he said. 'Come, gentlemen. Ducelle has framed the answer. We must *show* them what must be done.'

We trooped obediently after him down the steps and across the promontory going towards the sycamore tree where the silent labourers watched sullenly, but skirting the tree itself. The sun westered beyond Mit Ghamr and the hills which reared above the level expanses of the barren plains, their sharply defined and ragged peaks like some ancient ruin piled carelessly upon that vast and deserted wasteland.

I saw the terrorised insanity in the faces of the surviving labourers. And I saw more than a touch of madness in the obsessed De Lesseps himself, and yet I followed him, along with three certifiedly intelligent engineers.

As we crossed the broken ground under the silent scrutiny of the crouched arabs under the tree, I saw a small Arabian gray horse racing along the near bank of the canal, and for a wild, moonstruck moment, I thought that we were about to receive an eleventh hour reprieve, a message from the Viceroy, a new subscription of ten million pounds to advance the project, a promise of compromise from the gods themselves.

De Lesseps glanced towards Ducelle and shook his head, smiling and compassionate. He paused in the sun on the promontory and we watched the horse race towards us.

When the animal was only a few yards away, I saw that the rider was female, and though sun-toasted, she was a brown-haired, brown-eyed European.

'My daughter,' Ducelle said, almost apologetically.

'It is Oriana who makes life bearable in this place for any of us,' De Lesseps said.

'I'm afraid she's a spoiled brat,' Ducelle said. 'But that's the fault of you doting "uncles" of hers, as well as of the way I've reared her – dragging her around the world, keeping her in this pestilence when I ought to have sense enough to send her away.'

'We know why you don't send her away,' Linant said. 'She won't go.'

'Well, I should force her to go,' Ducelle said as the horse came in close enough to send a cloud of dust across us, and the girl, dressed in cotton shirt, open at the throat, smeared cotton pants and riding boots, swung down from the saddle. He raised his voice, lashing out at his daughter. 'How many times have I told you, Oriana, not to ride out alone in this place?'

'God knows, father,' she said, teasing him. 'How many?'

'You could be killed, you could be raped, thrown from your horse,' Ducelle began, but the girl's taunting laughter cut across his anguished voice.

'How can you be my father, Father? You're such an old maid.'

'Being your sole parent has made an old maid of me far before my time,' Ducelle told her.

Oriana gave her father a casual kiss on his cheek. She kissed Linant and Mougel as well, clinging to De Lesseps for a moment as if to gather strength from his body, or to demonstrate her own adoration of him. She had not yet glanced towards me, apparently.

'I needed a rest,' Oriana told her father. 'I've been in that hospital until I was ready to drop from exhaustion – '

'Ten hours sleep would have revived you,' her father said.

She stroked the mane and neck of the gray horse. 'Ali Khan is all the *rest* I need. Ali Khan rests me far more than any mattress.'

'You instilled in her her obsession for horses,' Ducelle accused De Lesseps.

The Vicomte shrugged. 'All women have an affinity for horses, my dear Ducelle. I merely taught Oriana to appreciate and respect quality in horseflesh.'

'You've taught me so much, my dear Vicomte,' Oriana said, still almost consciously avoiding me.

'You won't get off by changing the subject, or flattering the Vicomte,' Ducelle said. 'There are jackals out there to attack you if you are thrown and knocked unconscious.'

'Father, you know better. Jackals are such cringing little cowards.'

'Perhaps,' Ducelle said. 'But lions aren't – '

'Lions? Father, the only lion I have seen on this Isthmus is my own dear lion – the Lion of the Suez.' She smiled in adulation upon De Lesseps who beamed back at her, accepting her accolade.

'Sweet talk won't save you from me,' her father said.

'Tell my father, dear Vicomte De Lesseps,' Oriana pleaded. 'Tell him how hard I've worked. And how I've developed your own brand of pride. I do have something of that in me. I've stood everything in that stinking hospital – filth and blood, gangrene stench and death. I get tired, but I no longer vomit at the sight and smell of a putrid bed, or even the sick-sweet smell of cholera.'

From their conversation it was clear she had worked fifty-odd hours in the hospital without a break, and strangely

enough, after her horseback ride, there was no sign of weariness in her, only a curious sense of pride and new self-respect.

His daughter, Ducelle said, was at once his pride and burden. She was almost eighteen and should have been in a young lady's finishing school somewhere to put a gloss upon that magic that glowed from within her and lit to a gentle flame in her dark eyes. She looked rather like her mother had looked at her age, and she had a great amount of *Mère* Ducelle's wilfulness and directness. In spite of her upbringing, in spite of the fact that she had spent nearly the whole of her teen years in China, or India or Turkey, she somehow seemed to have turned out well. Though circumstance and her father's profession had set her down in this Isthmus wilderness where the only men she ever saw were her ageing "uncles" and the Egyptian workers, she appeared quite happy. Her smooth forehead rose into a cropped halo of lovelocks and tendrils of ash brown. Her dark eyes were large like her father's, wide-set, open, clear and shining, eager and yet somehow strangely tranquil.

Abruptly, as if to escape her father's nagging, Oriana turned and looked at me. She started to smile and then stopped. Something happened in her face. The nearest I can describe it is panic. She looked as if she'd seen me before somewhere, had never expected to see me at all, had been looking for me, or as if I had come upon her in an alien place, unexpectedly, unfairly and unannounced.

Finally, she met my eyes and smiled before she looked away again. Her teeth glittered whitely in her golden face. Her high cheekbones, straight profile, full-lipped mouth and tilted chin gave her a look of fierce pride. Her brown hair had bleached highlights from the sun, and she wore it cut shorter than any of the European men. She was a beautiful girl, I thought, or she would have been beautiful in a party dress, with a manicure, cologne and even a touch of cosmetics.

She ground-tied her horse when De Lesseps moved forward again, and walked along beside me. I was aware she watched me covertly, looking away when I glanced towards her and smiled. I could see the rise of her small, rounded

breasts under the fabric of her cotton shirt. Every time I looked at her, she looked quickly away.

De Lesseps told her that I was from the British consulate and that I was an old friend of long standing, going back more than nine years.

She peered up at me then with that curious and upsetting direct way. 'Have you come here to add to Vicomte De Lesseps' already intolerable burdens, Mr Hamilton?'

'Oriana! I must protest. Mr Hamilton is the Vicomte's guest, his respected friend. You have no right to confront him like this,' her father said.

Oriana went on staring at me. 'Well, he's British, isn't he?'

'I am British,' I said.

'Since when have the British been friends of ours?' Oriana wanted to know.

'Tony is different, a different bird,' De Lesseps said. 'He can see with me the vital, international need and reward of a canal across the Suez. Through Tony Hamilton I shall educate the British, through him, I shall reach their minds and hearts – '

'And treasury, I hope,' Oriana said.

'I do hope so, Oriana,' De Lesseps said. But he was looking at me. I suddenly found myself unable to face that direct and honest little gamine.

We walked some moments in silence and then Oriana startled us all by saying in a clear, flat tone, her unblinking gaze on my face, 'Well, I'll admit. I have never seen a man as handsome as you, but I still don't trust you. Pretty is as pretty does. And handsome or not, you are still an Englishman.'

'Fee fie fo fum,' her father said.

I forced myself to laugh, but I still found myself unable to look her directly in the face any more.

We went to the brink of the canal in the blaze of sunlight, to the distant howling of the jackals edging in to feast on carrion and fetid flesh. We remained in clear and unobstructed view of the natives under the tree.

We avoided a huge crater which had been gouged from the slope. The pit was not within the marked channel of the

proposed canal; it was simply a vast hole in the ground. It looked like one of those craters bitten out in military bombardment. And one looked in vain along here for any limits of the canal. After the deluge there was no longer a disciplined course for the projected waterway. There was, in that blinding sunlight only ruin, ruin as far as the eye could see and the desert world looked almost as if it had returned to its former evil enchantment under an unholy and mysterious spell.

De Lesseps grabbed my arm or I would have fallen into a narrow crevice, much like the broken places left in the wake of earthquakes.

He descended into one of these deep-gouged pits and we traipsed after him. A dredge and shovel which only days ago had been eating out a path across the wasteland was now a heap of rusty debris, ugly and useless. All around it was like a junkyard, littered with stacks and piles of rusted ploughs, boilers, carts and barges. Where they had been laying tracks parallel to the watercourse for the intercoastal railroad, ties were cast about like toothpicks and the railings were twisted, shapeless and decaying, surrendered to the life-sucking sun. It was all lost, vain and worthless. I did not see how even De Lesseps in his exalted self-confidence and blind optimism could discover a shred of hope in this place.

De Lesseps went to the sump of the pit with his engineers and I. Once down there, they began to discuss in loud voices the best ways to clear away the rubbish and refuse and be ready to resume digging once the heavy machinery arrived.

I saw the Arabs gradually disperse from the stingy shade of the sycamore and approach the pit rim in silence, watchful, cautious and ever suspicious.

De Lesseps led his chorus of optimism for some moments and then dug out a broken boulder bigger than his chest. As we watched in disbelief, he knelt and hefted the great stone up in his arms. Keeping his shoulders back and his head up, he ascended the steep slope of the pit toward its brink where the natives watched, their eyes round.

I stared after him, expecting to see him fall with heart attack, stroke or heat prostration. I expected him to burst a blood vessel at the least, or pop free a hernia, or fall backwards and break his obsessed neck.

From the top of the pit, we could hear the astounded whispers of the labourers. Mougel, Linant and Ducelle chose more reasonable stones, hefted them and started up the slope.

I felt Oriana's dark eyes upon me. And to this day I cannot tell you if it was her doubting gaze, or De Lesseps' magnetic influence, or perhaps the way when De Lesseps gained the rim of the pit and walked among the natives, I was stunned and deeply moved by their simple faith and reverence in his presence. They actually believed this foolish and symbolic act of his had purpose and meaning. Of course it meant nothing except as proof to his employees that he was not beaten. Anyhow, I must confess that I even bent down, took up a couple of broken two-by-fours and hauled them up the incline in the Vicomte's wake . . ..

When we were all on the promontory again, De Lesseps stood tall, with one boot resting on his great boulder, and smiled around at all of us as if we were his beloved children, despite race, creed, religion or national origin.

I saw the love and admiration in the faces of the labourers and even seeing it could not credit it. Such idolatry was simply beyond my understanding. It was as if he had hypnotised us all.

'And so, my dear friends,' he said in Arabic, 'this is what we must do. We must show those who would terminate us that we are not only alive and well, but anxious to get on with this project to the benefit not of one nation, or one people, but of all nations and all peoples. We have a great crusade here. We must be ready to carry it forward.'

They cheered him. They stood, hungry and sick and frightened, and cheered him. This response was like an elixir to the tired man. His smile broadened, his dark eyes brimmed with tears and he tilted his leonine head, standing with his thick legs apart. 'There are those who would stop us,' he said. 'But we will not be stopped. There are those who would return this desert to the jackals and the lizards, but we will beat them all at their own game. Eh, Oriana? Won't we, Oriana?'

But his most devoted disciple, for what must have been the first time, was not listening to him.

Oriana was staring at me, almost as if transfixed. None of us would ever have known it except for the Vicomte's calling sudden attention to her so that she was caught unaware.

I glanced at the young girl – fresh, dewy-eyed, naive, open-hearted, direct, and still in her teens – and I saw in her honest gaze something I had not encountered to my knowledge, in the last twenty years. She couldn't take her eyes off me, and she didn't give a damn in that moment who knew it. She stared so intensely and so warmly, in fact, that I felt a slow, heated flush creep upward from my own jawline to my temples.

# II

I CAME TO Ismailia from Karachi with a stopover at the British Embassy in Aden. I travelled swiftly, as rapidly as the battle cruiser *Dover* – assigned to transfer me – could travel across the inconstant Arabian Sea.

As I travelled westward, I suffered a faint, yet persistent, sense of disorientation, as well as a touch of *mal de mer*. Unlike most of my fellow Britons, I had no great love, or even a high tolerance, for the sea. And my indisposition simply never gorged to that monstrous, humiliating and degrading crisis of rail-hanging, so I never felt relief from the moment I boarded a sea-going vessel until I finally walked Spanish down its gangplank. Aboard any ship I was condemned to live in a mist of nausea, not clearly aware of what was going on around me and unable to care very much, either; headachy, hollow-headed, queasy-bellied. No natural-born seaman I, I found this trip more unsettling than ever before.

I mention this wholly personal malaise because of its effect on my disposition. I became irritable, fine-drawn, impatient, and more intolerant than oridinarily of bores and stupidity.

I realise it is far less than politic to mention Lord Stoppard, Cecil Rhoades-Herring, in immediate sequence with that last remark. Yet this appears the only appropriate progression of details if I am to place all the facts of this account in their proper perspective.

Though my mission had been given highest priority by the Home Office, Stoppard managed to keep me waiting thirty minutes in an anteroom while he drank and traded rumours with friends in his study. When at last I was ushered into his staid and formal office, my natural distaste for the man had

surfaced and I was almost afraid he would read my antipathy in my eyes.

I need not have entertained any such qualms. As I entered the book-lined den, crossing thick Persian carpeting, I found Lord Stoppard sprawled in a high-backed club chair, finishing off the bottle of brandy he'd been sharing with his cronies. He stood up, ordered a fresh decanter of brandy from his manservant, and shook hands with me. 'Hamilton. Hamilton,' he said. 'Yes. It's good to see you.'

He had a way of making you feel that he'd never seen you before in his life, or if he had, he'd certainly forgotten, having lost your face in a welter of far more urgent matters. These urgent matters still weighed heavily on his mind and he insisted upon rehashing them all before getting down to the reason for my visit. He had been dealing in gossip with his recent guests and his mind still swarmed with its heat and malice.

It seemed that the daughter of a dear friend of his had disappeared in Athens, only to turn up, alive and well, living in Arab style, mind you, in Cairo. Her own mother had contracted malaria in her heartbroken search for the missing daughter and had died in the Sudan.

'Incredible,' he said. 'Angels and ministers of grace defend us. I ask you, Hamilton, what in God's name is this younger generation coming to?'

I spread my hands. I not only didn't know, I didn't give a damn.

He nodded, vigorously. 'You're right, of course, Hamilton. It's all a bit much, eh? The life of a Consul is no bed of roses, eh? Not out here. You heard about the Rodericks, didn't you? I'm sure you must have.'

'I've been in Karachi, Lord Stoppard.'

'I can tell you, the matter of the Rodericks has caused me sleepless nights and put gray hairs around my anus. The Rodericks – you knew the family, of course? Lovely family – British to the heart and core. They returned from Gondokoro but were detained many hapless months in Khartoum before they were permitted to return to England, or even to leave the country. Though he was an ex-consul himself, Roderick was powerless in his dealings with the

strange and wily Musa Pasha. The Egyptian *wali* hounded the ex-consul so relentlessly that Roderick appealed to me. Before I could take any action, Roderick had been threatened and harried until he was forced to take refuge with the Bulgarian consulate. Well, as you can imagine, Hamilton, this caused such repercussions, including terrorised resignations by most of the Sudanese working for the consulate that the protection of Roderick and his wife was withdrawn. Well, you know Roderick. Eh? Eh? The Bulgarian Consul swore that Roderick stirred up ill feelings against him on all sides. The Bulgarian Consul bitterly accused Roderick of going 'from house to house' in Khartoum saying he was being victimised by the Bulgarians. Well, thanks to my speedy intervention, protection was restored, then taken away again on orders from Sofia and the office of the Foreign Minister himself. Plainly, the Bulgarians wanted to put distance between themselves and Roderick if he were going to take action for damages against the Egyptian viceroy, Khedive Ismail, for trading in slaves.

'There followed charges and countercharges. The Rodericks were forced to secure themselves for months in the American mission. Well, I finally was able to smooth the feathers of Musha Pasha and Viceroy Ismail Pasha. The Rodericks were permitted to return to England. But even before he got out of the country, Roderick was loudly swearing he would press claims on the slave-trading matter against Musa Pasha and the Khedive from London.

'I tried to talk some wisdom to Roderick, even appealed to his former good sense through his wife. I reminded him slavery was no new issue, that enslaving the Sudanese natives was an established tradition, not condoned certainly by Her Majesty's government, but recognised as a fact of life down here, eh? Eh? Why more than twenty years ago, Viceroy Mehemet Ali had told one of his first governors-general in the Sudan: "You are aware that the end goal of all our efforts and expense down there is to procure Negroes. Please show zeal in carrying out our wishes". . . .

'And of course none of the Balkan States could either feel or show any compassion or agreement in the slave matter with Roderick. Balkan mercenaries in the Sudanese army are

allowed to capture slaves and do with them what they can. It keeps the mercenaries content and is a substitute for military pay. There is nothing in the Koran which bars a slave from owning a slave.

'But Roderick was so outraged by the treatment accorded him that he was using the slave matter to expose the true conditions down here, past the middle of this nineteenth century.

'Roderick got no support from the French, either. The confidant of the governor-general was a gray haired French adventurer named Thibault. Thibault, a Parisian, had been trading in the Sudan for almost forty years. He somehow remained immune from those diseases which regularly wiped out his rivals. He wore Turkish clothes, and because of his status with the Viceroy, no one dared offend him. You remember old Thibault, eh? Eh, Hamilton? His greatest moment of fame came when he took to London the first giraffes ever seen in Britain. He marched the incredible and ungainly animals from the docks through the East End to the Zoo. This was the man who is presently the French consulate-general in Egypt. What help could Roderick expect from him? Eh? Eh?'

He took a long sip of brandy, smacking his lips and touching at his trim moustache with the backs of his index fingers.

'And as for Roderick expecting understanding and support from the Bulgarians, the Austrians or even the Germans in this slave matter, that was entirely preposterous. Ludicrous. Absurd. In the name of the prophet – figs, I say!'

Lord Stoppard shook his head, laughing in frustration. 'It was entirely a headstrong act for Roderick, whatever his motive or provocation. Any Turk who desires can and does buy a young girl or boy whenever he wishes. A Balkan merchant might own several black slaves of both sexes. And it is no secret – certainly not to our national credit – Ismail Pasha, the ruler of Egypt was able to charter one of our very own British ships to bring him a consignment of white Christian slaves supplied through his agent at Constantinople. Did you know that, Hamilton? Eh? Our

own British ship, the *Kangaroo*, and we have outlawed slavery on the high seas since 1805. I tell you, Roderick is assuredly tilting at windmills, eh? Eh? Another brandy, my boy, another brandy. Eh?'

He poured for us and sat back smiling oddly as though each day brought him more puzzlement and less wisdom. He shook his head. 'We British and even the Europeans profess their consciences aroused by slavery in the United States, less heed certainly is given to what is happening in Turkey which is an ally of both Britain and France. Burton himself gives blood-curdling accounts of the trade in eunuchs. There exists a certain *cachet* for wealthy turks who have white girls in their harems. It's the custom for a rich man to give his son several pretty girls from the Caucasus as a birthday present. Even after the Crimean war the London *Morning Post* reported "an absolute glut in the Turkish market" of "white human flesh." Most of those females are from Georgia or Circassia, of course, but when the flow is interrupted by Russian pressures, in some Bulgarian districts each family had to give up one child. It was called the blood tax. I've seen white European children on the slave vendues myself. What support could Roderick possibly expect from any of these governments? Eh?

'But it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, eh? In my diplomatic intervention with Ismail Pasha on behalf of the hapless Roderick, I believe I have made friends with the Viceroy. We get along as well as a European and one of these heathens can ever co-exist. I found out quite a bit about him. I think that's why you were advised to come by Aden and see me on your way to the Isthmus. I believe if you can find some way to pay the Viceroy enough, we might be able to wield great influence against De Lesseps – '

'Bribery, Lord Stoppard?'

'Call it what you like. We must do what we must do to stop the French in their dangerous adventuring out here. I would say that bribery is a mild weapon we may have to use against this De Lesseps . . . I would not even rule out – under the greatest secrecy and through intermediaries, of course – even assassination to gain our nationalistic aims.'

'I'm afraid I'm not an assassin.'

'Of course you're not. Neither am I. But national goals come first, my boy. Eh? Our ends are just, any means to gain those ends are justified. Not only in my eyes, but in the secret planning of every world power. We'll stop at nothing to stop the French because their meddling out here upsets a delicate balance of power which might be fatal to the peace of this area and most of Europe if they are not headed. What is the life of one or two people in matters of such international import? Eh? Eh?'

I smiled and shook my head. 'I'm sure I couldn't bribe the Ismail Pasha. In the first place he spends sums the size of the British debt to expand his seraglios. I simply cannot think in such incredible sums. And as for killing anyone, even in the best interests of Her Majesty – '

'My boy! My boy! Don't misunderstand me. No one is asking you to harm a fly! British policy remains British policy. It is just that under present conditions – with the Suez Canal company almost bankrupt – we must act with Ismail Pasha, or anyone else – we must strike while the iron is hot.'

I gazed at Lord Stoppard. The vehement francophobia provoked in Lord Stoppard by Napoleon III's expansion in the East and by De Lesseps' obstinate pursuit of his holy grail – the canal across the Suez – was the fashionably proper response at this moment for any patriotic Briton. And no one could accuse Lord Stoppard of any lack of patriotism. Like all loyal subjects, he was programmed by passionate disapprobation of French meddling and French expansionism in the Mediterranean. One believed with all one's British heart that France did conspire to destroy and excise Commonwealth influence south of the Mediterranean, and De Lesseps' ditch – that despised Suez canal project – was the ugly and magnificent symbol of French ambition and French greed and French adventuring. Such pursuits could not be tolerated. If the French were successful down here, one was reminded forcefully in every editorial officially approved for London newspapers or magazines, Great Britain was faced with annihilation, its empire and its commerce and maternal concerns for the

second world disrupted and terminated for all time. As Lord Stoppard said, *Punch* expressed it best: 'If the French have their way . . . the sun of England must set forever. . . .'

Lord Stoppard looked as if he'd missed his true calling on this earth. He should have been a chipmunk. He had the front teeth and short upper lip for it. But the metaphor of a chipmunk might suggest the idea of a docile, burrowing, furry little creature. If Lord Stoppard did resemble the species in any manner, it was as a cornered chipmunk. I found him a petty, mean-minded man, but as dangerous as any rabid beastie you'd ever encounter. Because of his status in the social, governmental and financial systems, his consanguinity with the royal family, and his connections in every branch of the bureaucracy, his longevity in government service, his blood and school ties (with all the puns intended and intact), he manifestly represented the entrenched establishment, he wielded immense power and he knew it. He could destroy a man, or a man's career, with a leer, a word, a sneer, a well-phrased letter of commendation. And he would do it, on the slightest pretext. He was the trained interceptor of the unintentional snub; he detested levity in any subordinate; if he found a man to be less than 'a gentleman' by his own standards, that man was forever branded in Lord Stoppard's mind as a fraud, a climber, a pretender, with his political future most certainly in jeopardy.

'I think you must talk to Ismail Pasha, Hamilton. Simply talk to him. Sound him out. He is not as committed to this De Lesseps' foolhardiness as his uncle was. He may be receptive to British intervention, if he can save face, and escape bankruptcy which certainly looms ahead of him if he continues to follow De Lesseps down the garden path.'

'I find Ismail Pasha a good ruler – for this place and this time.'

'You may think him a good ruler. He may be. But he is not strong. Because of De Lesseps he is in financial hot water. Perhaps the British can extricate him. He is not the strong, inflexible man Abbas Pasha was ahead of him. And Ismail is certainly not anything like his father. Mehemet Ali

was a savage, a heathen, but he ruled strongly in what he saw as the best interests of his realm. Said Pasha was weak, a pawn practically in De Lesseps' hands. Our best chance now is to work with Ismail Pasha. We British must defeat De Lesseps by any means at our disposal. We shall defeat him.'

'Perhaps if we wait, nature will defeat him for us – and our hands will remain clean.'

He sat forward. 'Our hands *are* clean, my boy. Our cause is noble and just, our ends are in the highest interests of humanity. This justifies our means. And I assure you, my dear boy, we shall not – and we must not – sit back and wait for a frivolous nature to do our work for us. That is not Her Majesty's way, my boy. Not at all. Oh, we accept with pleasure any advantage nature magnanimously provides us – as she has done in this cataclysm on the Isthmus. However, Hamilton, if by any little urging, we can spur nature to further and extreme lengths, we shall do that, too. What we shan't do is stand idly by and see De Lesseps and Napoleon III trample the flag of England in the dust of the Arabian desert.'

From Aden, I went by the cruiser *Dover* to the port of Suez. Landing, I felt as if I had entered a kind of dislocated paradise – I found myself at last once more in an English hotel! Praise the Father, this hospice boasted a spacious inner court, arranged as an open conservatory where flowering shrubs lent an aura of Shropshire coolness that was of course bogus and nonexistent, but for the moment pleasant after the desert and the sea and after Lord Stoppard. And the bar served 'Allsopp's Pale Ale' on draught.

When I was led up to my suite, arranged in advance by the local consulate, I found a comfortable bed with sheets and pillow cases! Briefly, I suffered those deep pangs of loneliness and longing for England, and yet, in these surroundings, I was nearer to that remembered Eden than I had been for many years.

The hotel was crowded with Europeans in passage to India and the orient. The bright-cheeked, stiff-backed, full-bosomed English ladies seemed to have walked in fresh from

Claridges'. I was surrounded by my own countrymen. I heard English spoken, clipped and clearly and without shattering or incomprehensible accent, for the first time in a seeming eternity. I luxuriated in the sounds of politely subdued and swallowed laughter, the reserved dialogues, the excitement of travellers finding each other thrown together in passing upon an alien Islamic island.

That night, for the last time for what seemed an age, I slept well. The Leeds-made mattress, the fresh-scented sheets and pillowcases transported me in my mind like insistent echoes or refracted prisms of memory back home to England, and I relaxed as I had not since I first came out here.

The rising sun blazed through the porous shades at the deepset windows and streamed fiercely into the room, bringing back my mission to me.

I got up, yawning, and raised the shades and opened the window. I stood looking out across the wretched little town and the oddly ruddy red estuary.

Before me sprawled the Red Sea. Its waves washed against the very walls of the Hotel India. The sun braised the Gebel Atakah off to my right. In the distance in the other direction I could see the foothills of the chain which clawed, crawled, erupted and towered its way north to culminate at Mount Sinai.

Beyond the crimson carpeting of the dazzling beach, the water itself seemed to glow with a reddish hue, a wavering reflection of the red cliffs that rose like fortifications out of the strange sea – a carmine colouration which likely caused the Arabian Gulf to be renamed the Red Sea.

At daybreak the town, piers, streets and harbour were almost empty, looking as clean-swept in the early morning as they ever would. In less than an hour, the quay came to bustling life, busy and loud and congested. Strange boats, their oars tipped with round paddles, swarmed like small animals yapping about the larger vessels arriving from or departing for Djedda. These deckless ships, with raised poop and tapering prow, resembled those Chinese junks in form and riggings. Even the cloaks, pants, shirts and floppy brimmed hats of natives and foreigners alike gave the

travellers a foretaste of Arabia, India, China and that whole world to the East.

After breakfast, I went out onto the terrace of the hotel. This elevated vantage commanded a panoramic view of the barren lands surrounding the town, for Suez is situated on an isolated angle of magenta land, like an island in the desert.

The caravan master awaited me. He said he'd been told that I was anxious to reach Ismailia without delay. If I could be ready in an hour, we would set out north on the newly macadamised road. He repeated several times that I was in haste to reach Ismailia and I did not bother to dispute him.

Now, the labourers straggled back to work under the benign eye of the masterful De Lesseps. Standing there, I could not see what he hoped to accomplish without incredible infusions of new capital. And I could not see where he hoped to find investors under these cruel conditions.

I saw only ruin as far as I could see in the late afternoon. I should have felt triumph. We British had won – almost on Lord Stoppard's own terms – with the mindless help of uncaring gods. We and nature had stopped De Lesseps, bankrupted and ruined him. We had prevailed out here in the Isthmus. We had imposed our imperial will once more half across the world from London. But what I really thought was, name of God, what horror has happened here? How do we live with ourselves now that we have smashed this dreamer and his dream?

In all the time he had strode, haughty and imperious and arrogant, I had hated De Lesseps, but now that he had been brought low, I felt pity for him which violated not only my personal considerations, but my governmental directions and design.

I shook De Lesseps and my mission from my thoughts. I glanced towards where Oriana Circe Ducelle stood in the great man's shadow. She was drinking in every word he spoke as if she died of thirst in this desert.

I told myself that I was glad that once Oriana recovered her natural aplomb and elan, she quite ignored me. Naturally, her open-hearted admiration had been flattering;

it had been a long time since I'd encountered youthful artlessness, the unaffected and guileless attention of an open-hearted young girl. Naturally, I accepted it for what it was, but I admitted to a certain inner warmth and quickening of pulses. I was flattered.

Her father teased her mercilessly about her infatuation until she threatened to push him into the nearest pit. Her vast dark eyes brimmed with tears. Instantly rueful, her father tried to make amends, attempted to take her gently against his thick chest, but she pushed him away, grabbed the reins of her horse and strode away towards the remains of the stables and corral. We did not see her again until dinner.

A light breeze rose as the sun set and an impenetrable stillness, intensified by hollow moaning and whistling murmurs full of the menace of onrushing but distant night storms on the desert, shrouded the headed sands and corrugated dunes. As darkness approached the yelps and smells of the jackals increased.

'I'd like to get a rifle and go out and shoot them all. Great practice, actually to hit one of the slinking devils in the dark,' De Lesseps said. He laughed. 'But if I killed them, what would we do with the carcasses?'

De Lesseps dressed for dinner which was served in the fading desert twilight at eight by Ibrahim in a fresh abba. I found a white linen suit which didn't betray too badly the folds and wrinkles of travel, a white shirt and a dark tie. The three engineers came in to eat, after washing their faces and arms in boiled water, as they had dressed all day.

It was Oriana who surprised and stunned us all when she appeared just as we finished a toast in wine and were about to sit down at the long formal mahogany table with its polished high-backed chairs.

Ducelle offered an apology for his daughter's absence. 'Oriana may not come to dinner,' he said in a rueful voice. 'She is still angry with me.'

'It's always difficult for a doting father to realise his little girl has suddenly become a young lady,' De Lesseps said. 'I know. I've had that experience.' He gave us a faint smile. 'Come to think of it, I believe I've had every

experience, been down all roads at least twice, by now.'

As if wishing to discomfit her father by making a liar of him, Oriana appeared smiling and unselfconscious in the doorway.

The four of us turned as one man and stared at the delightful little vision rimlighted in the candle-lit room.

Oriana paused for one instant in the doorway and caught all the fire-warm glow of the candles. She had calculated her entrance precisely. In the abrupt silence, she found every astonished eye upon her as if she were some devastating young stranger. These ageing men who had grown accustomed to seeing her in cotton pants, dung-smeared boots and open-collared muslin shirts, mistook her, for one moment, for a porcelain princess.

She somehow glowed – with that scrubbed freshness vouchsafed only to the very young after their evening baths – from the top of her lovingly brushed ash brown hair to her toes, winking at the hem of her pale lime-green dress. Her simple gown was cut low at the bodice, cinched almost cruelly at her eighteen-inch waist and spilling outward in delicate folds and pleats to inches from the floor.

She gave us a faintly impersonal, reserved and somehow remote smile that warned us she was no little girl playing at dressing up, and woe betide the man who even thought such blasphemy. She was a young woman. It was in her face and in her studied gestures. There was no self-consciousness, no overdone coquetry, no hint of falseness. She was what her demeanour said she was and she was not astonished by the change, even if her parent and her cronies were.

She raised a darkly tanned, slender arm to her bosom and with that innate self-assurance of lovely young women everywhere, came toward us.

De Lesseps himself gallantly held the chair on his left for her. She thanked him with that faint smile and sat down. Throughout the dinner she was charming, giving most of her attention to De Lesseps, but unobtrusively leading the conversation when our dialogues waned.

I must admit she gave me as little attention as courtesy and breeding would allow. She seemed totally unaware of me unless I spoke to her, which was infrequently since she

was on the other side of De Lesseps from me, and he was a man who dominated every conversation, and in fact grew impatient and bored when the topics strayed far from him and his interests.

When I did speak to her, she answered me politely and almost curtly. To her father she was similarly reticent. It was as if she were punishing us for our cruelty to her, her father for having tormented her publicly and me for having forever shattered that careless calm and ease of her former existence at the edge of girlhood and the brink of young womanhood, that pleasant, undemanding place between two worlds.

The sun disappeared, the birds settled from sight and on the broken and ill-defined western ridges an Arab caravan, plodding towards Damascus, staggered, dark and irregular little figures appeared above the faintly shining rim of the horizon, loitering and then vanishing like some desert mirage.

A sense of unreality settled over me, the cringing yowling of the jackals, the muted lutes of the labourers, the candlelight, the mysterious spell of the silent desert, the unbearably fresh young beauty of Ducelle's dark-eyed little gamine.

I exhaled heavily, thanking the gods that I was too old for her. I had only wry sympathy for that man enmeshed and caught in the intrigue, delight and misery of her transient devotion.•

I confess I managed unwittingly to anger her when the talk turned, as it definitely had to under present conditions, to the staggering death toll from cholera and dysentery after the flash flooding. I said, looking at Oriana across De Lessep's stout chest from me. 'I can understand staying here at the peril of one's life only if one must. Why do you go on risking your life in this diseased place?'

She smiled, in a chilled way. Her voice sliced me as neatly and expertly and as deeply as the cut of any rapier. 'I stay, Mr Hamilton, because I belong here. I do much good. I believe in Vicomte De Lesseps' magnificent plan as many people believe in their gods. And I was here when this was a place of extraordinary progress. And I shall stay until it commences again and is completed.'

I made no further attempts to engage the young lady in any conversation. I hesitated at remarking on the weather in her presence.

They retired early in the camp at Ismailia. Soon after dinner Oriana excused herself and darkness intensified because she was the gossamer flare that had provided the brilliance of the evening. De Lesseps and the rest of us sat on the veranda and smoked cigars. Ducelle and Mougel left, yawning. De Lesseps and Linant went off to pore over the water-damaged blueprints.

I felt strangely restless. I felt empty-bellied and troubled without being able to say why. I could not escape the thought that I was an enemy in this place, though De Lesseps accepted me as friend and supporter. I knew that Oriana in in her infinite and inexplicable wisdom did not accept me. She did not trust me. And she was right.

And it was not that I opposed my government's official distrust and disapproval of French expansionism and of De Lessep's ditch. I saw great wrong in all of it. I was at heart a loyal British subject, a representative of the Queen in this place. But I had learned long ago that one fell under De Lessep's charismatic spell out here. And there was a mysterious enchantment in the desert, a languor that made the reality of London and Paris and Berlin seem light years removed and somehow terribly irrelevant. And, I didn't like to admit it, even to myself, but there was another kind of magic being worked upon my middle-aged heart out here, and that seemed the most dangerous of all.

I stood up and leaned against an upright at the edge of the veranda. I tossed away my cigar and watched it arc in the darkness like a fallen star.

At night the broken excavations retreated, dissolving into blackness as the desert reached out into a vast broken sheet of shadow. It was a land forged of crumpled sheet-iron, a land older than time itself. There was a sense of timelessness about even these tragic events of the moment, more sense of immediacy in the lives and failures and loves of Geb, the earth-god, father of Osiris, the intrigues and fears of Amen-Re and Hathor and Horus of antiquity.

The faint lamps in the hospital windows and in the offices mingled with the tossing lights of heaven. Above the line of feeble candles a single great star shone steadily in the uncluttered atmosphere as it had burned for Menes, gleaming like an enormous beacon left burning in some long-forgotten window. Below its fabulous glowing, the wastelands lay whispering, interminable and black, a corrugated stillness hung over that eternal and restless region where the past and the present and the future were one.

I felt the urge and the need and the reckless desire to get drunk. I wanted to stride out into the darkness and shoot the whining jackals. I wanted to find a whore, even a native, clipped and tattooed one. But I did none of these things. I went to bed.

Sleep did not come that easily. In the darkness, I stripped down to under pants and prowled my room as if it were a cage.

When I heard the gentle rapping on the facing of my door, I ignored it for a long moment, not because I disbelieved it, but because, with accelerated heart, I did believe it.

The knock sounded again, louder, and more impatiently. I looked about for a robe and finding none in the darkness, I crossed the room and opened the door, using it as a shield between us.

Oriana stepped through, caught the door unexpectedly and quickly closed it, wrenching it from my grasp. 'Do you want everyone in the place to know I'm here?'

I stared at her in the wan darkness. She wore a gown of indeterminate colour in the shadows and a loose, eye-let lace transparent peignoir as fragile as moonbeams. She also wore a cologne that was faint and yet disturbing. I knew that scent would trail me and haunt me long after she'd moved on to more appropriate conquests.

Standing there more than half-naked I felt like a harried character in some French farce. I was damned if I were going to grope to cover my nakedness, or attempt to shield my vulnerability. She was the uninvited guest, let her feel any discomfiture, if any were to be felt.

She went directly to the dresser as if she'd been many times in this room, struck light to a short sulphur-tipped vesta and lighted a candle from its blaze, instantly displacing the obscuring dark of the night. I winced but went on standing there as if decked by Bond Street tailors.

'You don't look glad to see me,' she said, turning and leaning against the dresser.

'I look exactly what I am. Half-naked.'

She smiled. 'You look even prettier than ever like that.'

'Many women have told me so,' I said. 'Women old enough to be your mother. And they were telling me when you were in your cradle.'

'You should have waited,' she mused. 'I'd have been worth waiting for.'

'Well, I'm not,' I said. 'I don't know what I look like to you. But I am almost forty – '

'You mean you're thirty-nine.'

'Whatever. Far too old for the taste of virgin honey.'

She touched at things upon the dresser without even really being aware of them. 'Are you afraid of me?' she inquired.

'I'm not afraid of you,' I lied. 'I am afraid of what might come of this – this indiscretion. . . . Suppose you were discovered here? What would your father think?'

She shrugged, a pretty little gesture, but in itself upsetting. 'I have no idea what father might think. You'll have to ask him. I'm afraid there's a fearful gap between us – he's of another generation – '

'Yes. Mine.'

She sighed, gazing at me with a wan little smile. 'Do you think you can escape me by talking of how old you are?'

'The thought had occurred to me. Yes.'

She gave me a gentle, warmly twisted smile that made her lips irresistible.

'Well, it won't work,' she said. She exhaled heavily, the first sign she'd betrayed so far that she was less than totally at ease. 'Even if you were *older* than my father, you would still be younger. Inside. In every way that matters to me.'

'Whatever that means.'

'It means that you're not too old for me. You are what I've always wanted. You are the man I see in my fantasies.

You are the man I would choose in any crowd.'

'Well, unfortunately, there's no crowd here at the moment, is there?'

'Why are you nervous? Don't you like to hear that you are the one man I will ever want?'

'My God. Ever want! That's seventeen years old talking. You don't really see me at all. There is an old saying – almost as old as I am, for God's sake – that explains exactly what's happening to you. Love sees neither good nor evil. Love sees only its own reflection.'

'How pretty! Did you make that up? Just now? Just for me?'

'I told you I didn't make it up at all. It's an old truth. Far older than both of us. And the fact remains, my dear Oriana, as attracted as I am to you – '

'Are you? Are you attracted to me?'

I tried to smile. 'Like the lamp to the moth – '

'That's backwards – '

'That's what I'm trying to tell you. This whole business is backwards. The fact remains I am far too old for you. I am a certified member of your own father's stuffy old generation.'

She straightened from the dresser. I saw she meant to come to me across that narrow room and I was not prepared to deal with that. I'd enjoyed her unaffected artlessness, but I suddenly realised that disarming candour becomes unsettling aggression in the teenaged female. 'I've looked for you all my life,' she said.

'And that's not very long, is it?'

'You're the prettiest thing I've ever seen.'

I spread my hands and shook my head, afraid that I was going to retreat, and I was damned if I were going to play the fool any more than this moment demanded. 'You've simply been out here too long, Oriana. You've seen no *young* men at all, none your own age. . . . They're turning them out quite beautiful, quite charming these days, and in just the model to suit you, I'm sure.'

'They'd bore me to death,' she said. She paused at the foot of my iron four-poster bed, toying idly with one of the naked cherubs carved there.

'How do you know that?'

'Because it's true. Because of what I am, not because of what they might be. They would bore me, my dearest Tony, because they are not you.'

'Good lord, child – '

'Very good!' She applauded politely and sardonically. 'That's the exact tone father takes when he wants to impress me with my own immaturity.'

'You are immature,' I said. 'And this whole situation proves it. You swear undying devotion – '

'Did I say that?'

'Well, you hinted at it. And how long have you known me?'

She stroked the most personal area of the nude cherub. 'Don't you believe in love at first sight?'

'Certainly not. I hardly believe in love at all any more. That's how old I am.'

She drew a deep breath and regarded me softly. 'Don't be frightened, Tony. I'll teach you. I'll be patient – '

'And gentle – I do hope,' I taunted her.

'You may as well stop teasing me as if I were a child – '

'Aren't you? Really? Aren't you?'

She tilted her head and I was almost entrapped by those changeling shadows warming her dark eyes. She held my gaze steadily and provocatively. 'Why don't you find out?' she inquired, challenging me with look and tone. 'If you weren't such a coward – '

'But I am. A devout coward. I quail at the thought of deflowering a young girl – '

'Deflowering? What an old-fashioned word.'

'Yes, Old-fashioned. Quite acceptable, however, among my generation.'

She sighed expansively, and yawned like a sleepy child, but both knew her yawning had nothing to do with sleepiness, only with the tightness about her lungs and heart. 'You know I excite you . . . Do you think I can't tell?'

'Of course you excite me. I am only human. In fact, I'm damnably human. And I'm sure your woman's intuition tells you everything you want it to tell you.'

She spoke slowly, measuring her words and studying my

face. 'It tells me that something happened – something like lightning – the moment we looked at each other.'

I winced. 'I'm not fool enough to deny that.'

'Then why fight it?' She took another step towards me, as if observing some mating rite older than history.

I shook my head. 'I'm not fighting it, Oriana. I'm trying to make you see – that static charge which may well have – all right, indeed did – pass between us – has nothing to do with the name you're giving it. It has no relationship to love, true love, at all.'

She sighed. 'It's good enough for me.'

I cried out in muted anguish. 'That's because you are so young – you don't even know what love itself is – '

'Maybe not. I know what I feel for you. Inside. It's making me ill. If I had a sip of wine or a bite of food, I'd vomit, that's what you've done to my poor insides. I am burning up and liquid and sick for you. I know I'm burning up inside while you fiddle, you – you British Nero.'

I did retreat now, I couldn't help it. I took a step backward towards the concealing shadow. 'And suppose I surrendered to your blandishments – '

'What in God's name does that mean – ?'

' – suppose I let my primal urges possess me – ?'

'I don't understand that, either – '

' – suppose I did make love to you – '

'Now you're talking sense.' She nodded. 'That I understand.'

'Do you?' I didn't want to but I retreated a second step. 'Or do you understand only your seventeen-year-old conception of making love? I can assure you, your perception of physical love making and mine are likely to be totally and finally irreconcilable – '

'Try to reconcile them.' She pursued me one step in our ageless, age-old waltz.

'Do you think we'd hold hands?'

She shrugged. 'Perhaps at first. For a moment. You have lovely hands. They look strong and yet very gentle.'

'Followed by what? A chaste kiss?'

She laughed. 'God knows, I hope not.'

She was almost upon me, only inches separated the fever

of her body and the tumescence of mine. I shook my head again. 'If I touched you, and I shan't, if I held you – and I will not – I should want – all of you . . . Not some idealised, romantic, old-maid novelist's idea of what I should want . . . I'd want your naked body, your – '

'You're trying to frighten me, Tony. And you're only exciting me more.'

I walked away from her, gesturing in helpless frustration. 'You need a good horsewhipping.'

Her teasing voice clawed after me. 'We'll get around to that, darling. But not right away. Let's not rush things.'

I heeled around, laughing at her in spite of myself. 'Oh, my dearest child, can't you see how inappropriate, how impossible all this is?'

She shook her head, quite seriously. 'No. I can see nothing of the kind. I can see only two people – one of them quite pretty – me . . . One of them truly beautiful. You. Two people who ought to be in love. Probably God Himself in his infinite planning meant for us to be in love – '

'I don't think so. He made me at least twenty years too soon.'

'Where did you ever get such a stuffed-shirt notion? The Ismail Pasha takes ten year old girls into his harem.'

'Well, that may be Ismail Pasha's taste. As for me I've had too many ten year olds already – when I was ten years old.'

'You're changing the subject.'

'I'm certainly trying to.'

Suddenly she burst into tears. 'You don't want me, do you? You are trying to be kind, but you don't want me. You find me unattractive – '

'I find you young – '

'No. You've the best sort of education England provides. I know. Vicomte De Lesseps told me. You've served all over the world, known sophisticated and lovely women. How you must be laughing at me.' She wept unabashedly.

'My dearest child, I'm not laughing at you at all.'

She sniffed. 'Let me tell you something, Tony Hamilton. You call me your "dearest child" just one more time and I shall scream this house down . . . I may destroy my own

reputation, but I won't do yours any good, either – you defiler of young girls.'

'I'm sorry, my dearest . . . my dearest one . ... Believe me, if ever I saw a fresher, lovelier flower anywhere, I do not recall her . . . But that is why I must not do this. For you, my love, not for me. In this year of 1863, a young girl can only destroy herself by coming, almost naked, to a man's room.'

'What would you have me do?'

'If it were up to me, I'd have you do just what you have done. But I don't set the moral climate for this world. I'm a victim, just as you are . . . if you are wise, you will not show your desires and devotions so openly. You will hide them, and pretend, and run away – '

'I could never lie like that.' Her voice had an odd timbre, as if she suffered a slight cold. 'I could never be such a hypocrite.'

'All women in this age must be hypocrites, if they are to survive. Especially they must cloak and conceal their deepest inner desires.'

'Oh, I couldn't be so false.'

'But that is the world you must live in, the world of the false and the hypocritical. God gave man and woman the greatest gift of all eternity, the pleasure of their bodies, but man himself has made something ugly and sinful and corrupt of God's loveliest gift. Unfortunately we can't live with God. We must live with man.'

'If we were together now . . . no one would know,' she whispered in a hopeless little tone.

'Please,' I said. And now my own eyes filled with tears. 'Every day you stay in this infested place, you imperil your lovely young life. And now you want to endanger your future for a few moments of excitement.'

Her voice became dangerously chilled. 'Is that all you see? Is that all it would be to you?'

'I'm not talking about me. I'm talking about you. I'm trying to talk about you. About a lovely, unspoiled little seventeen-year-old who ought to go away from this place, away to school, away to parties and balls and soirées and afternoon teas and – '

'And away from you.' That dangerously cold voice crackled in the silent room. 'What you really want is to get me away from you, isn't it? Isn't it? You're so damned honest, say it . . . You're not honest at all . . . You're the liar and the hypocrite . . . You don't want me . . . The man of the world, educated, travelled, sophisticated. Why would he want an ignorant little nobody like me? Would you want me if I went to school and learned to be a lady? If I lied and simpered and pretended! Would that make you want me?'

I reached for her in compassion but she wrenched herself away from me. 'If I wanted you has nothing to do with it. I am not for you, for a thousand unhappy reasons I'm not for you.'

'Oh, you use words like weapons, but the fact is you don't want me at all. Not at all. I thought you'd want to make love to me. Oh, maybe not as wildly as I wanted you, but honestly and happily and high-heartedly. But you don't, do you? You talk so concerned for my welfare. But I think that's camel dung – '

'Hell has no scorn like a woman in fury,' I said.

'I am furious. Why don't you tell me the truth? You don't like girls at all, do you? That's what you are, isn't it? Tell me. That's what you are . . . one of those . . . I've heard about you – so many Englishmen are – are that way. Aren't they? And you're the worst of them all, because you pretend to be manly. You pretend to be so masculine, but yet so noble. You just don't want to. You don't want me. You don't want any woman, do you?'

I exhaled heavily, but did not answer. She stared at me, tears streaming down her gorgeous, little gamine face. Her rage made her tremble. 'And I don't trust you, either. Coming here smiling. You dirty rotten – Englishman . . . I don't believe you are the friend of the Vicomte's that you pretend to be, either. Maybe you can deceive that good and trusting man. But you can't fool me. You'll never fool me again. I know you. I know you for what you are.' She gulped, swallowing back her tears. 'But worst of all – I know you – for what you are not.'

She walked slowly and deliberately across to the dresser. She cupped her hand about the glittering candle and blew

out its fire. Then she walked out of the room and closed the door behind her. Somewhere a jackal yelped, and then there was silence.

After she was gone I resumed prowling in the abandoned room. . . .

# III

I'D HEARD ABOUT the Egyptian custom of sacrificing buffalo to honour a revered guest, but I'd never actually witnessed the ceremony, never walked in the blood, until the night De Lesseps was abruptly summoned to Ismail Pasha's summer palace.

The summons was a flowery invitation, couched in the most fawning words, but when he received it, De Lesseps laughed. 'It reads like an invitation. But it's a royal command . . . Come with me, Tony. I think you'll enjoy it. And since you haven't met the latest Viceroy, this is an ideal opportunity. You'll see him in all his guile and cunning.'

We drove up the macadamised highway in an Austrian-built coach sent, along with a company of palace guards to fetch us. We must have presented a picture of élite affluence, opulence and triumph, though as De Lesseps said laughing, he now knew how Marie Antoinette felt in her tumbrel on the way to the guillotine.

Ahead of our gold-appointed coach, beside and behind it, high-plumed soldiers in cardinal jackets and black silk pants were posted rhythmically upon purebred Arabian horses. The four horses drawing our gleaming coach actually pranced, attended by four coachmen. The interior of the vehicle was covered in calf's leather of the finest grade. There were sable lap robes and a small bar. With a wry smile, but honest admiration, De Lesseps called all of this finery a most significant sign of Mussulman progress.

As we seemed to glide north out of destruction into Arabian fantasy, De Lesseps fully underlined *where* we were going when he smiled and said, 'I want you to enjoy yourself, Tony. This is a different world, with different values and different morality. For example, if you prefer

young boys – if such is your sexual preference, you needn't try to conceal it here. I'm sure Ismail Pasha will be most pleased to accommodate your tastes.'

I laughed in helpless frustration. In the nine years I'd known him – and *his* tastes – De Lesseps had never suggested my interests might be other than heterosexual. In fact, we'd never discussed the matter. 'You must have been talking to Oriana,' I said, shaking my head. 'It is her determination that I am far less than masculine. She is convinced I am less than a man.'

'The wisdom of babes,' De Lesseps suggested in a mild tone.

I sighed, sitting back in the soft, almost obscene luxury of the coach. I let my mind return to Ismailia and the fiery little Oriana. How she must hate me! And I had to admit she had not been out of my thoughts since the night she came to my room. She had behaved as though I were a non-person, did not exist in her busy young world. I knew this was best, for both of us, and yet I felt pangs of regret, and the stirrings of longing. Too, she carried her discourtesy to those extremes which betray as much interest as hatred. In a way it was fun watching her avenge herself upon me. It's true that to insult anyone effectively, you must be sure he's aware he's been snubbed, even if you have almost to apologise for having been rude. When I laughed at her, she withdrew further, lovelier and more lost than ever – as God knew, she should be.

'Not every man's sexual preferences would stand close examination,' De Lesseps said. 'But down here, they are far more broadminded than in puritan London. Relax. Enjoy yourself.'

I glanced at him. A hint from Oriana and he was convinced. I shrugged and sat back against the luxurious upholstery. As a matter of fact, I was first violated, initiated or seduced – depending upon your own view – by the vicar of our local church when I was a choir boy at thirteen. I overlook the attempt of the headmaster at Higdon who attempted to mount me dog-fashion when I was eleven, because he was unable to insert his limber tool and finally sagged away, sobbing in frustration. However, I am

convinced that my sexual preferences were set in concrete, and for life, by the scullery maid in my mother's kitchen who hid naked with me for heated hours on many long sultry afternoons. I grew to young manhood convinced where my preferences lay. I did not suffer the ambivalence of many of my public school and university fellows who didn't know what they were, or if they were, and were terrified of being exposed in a hidebound society. Many of them marry Mary because it's expected of them, or their careers demand it, but yearn secretly for dear old Bruce in third form. Torn, suffering inner conflicts, they keep their agonising secrets closeted away and exercised only on infrequent, sweated and guilty excursions into London on *business*. I was never in the least judgmental. I met these agonised fellows all the time in the consular service. To each his own. A man's religion and preferences – and even his prejudices – are his own affair. It was just that, despite what Oriana thought and obviously retailed, I never yearned back to Bruce when I could clasp close someone's convenient and consenting Mary.

I realised De Lesseps was speaking and turned, trying to follow what he said and from his words piece together what had gone before. 'Oriana seems to hate you cordially. Perhaps only because you are British, and she doesn't love the British. She even insists that you are not to be trusted.'

When our coach entered the brilliantly illumined night garden at Ismail Pasha's palace, volleys of artillery announced our arrival. Lamps and candles glowed profligately in every window of the great chateau. Torches flared every few feet along the garden walls. The grounds were brilliantly decorated and peopled with Mid-Easterners in their finest robes and turbans, Turks, European business men and government officials, publishers and royalty.

As we came along the drive the troops standing at attention presented arms. There had even been troops lining the road between Boulac and Cairo as we passed in our coach.

With a faint, wry smile, De Lesseps bowed his head, acknowledging the ceremony outside our conveyance. From

the side of his mouth he said, 'Everything looks so lovely. Like the Arabian nights, eh? Yet it was in this garden that Kleber was assassinated.'

Since Kleber belonged to the era of the *first* Napoleon, long before my time, and was without relevance, I merely muttered an appropriate, 'My God.' And my host was satisfied.

As the volleys of artillery announcing our arrival abated, another round, including cannon, blasted the night. The Viceroy drove swiftly into the court in a phaeton driven by himself, followed at a short distance by priests, great dignitaries of his regime and officers of all ranks in full uniform. They followed the wake of Ismail Pasha's carriage, riding at a foot pace in two uneven rows, a little behind the prince's vehicle.

As the Viceroy approached, the order to present arms was passed along the line and the soldiers cheered and wept. Ismail Pasha looked down at them but did not return the salutations. Behind the dignitaries came at least a dozen gold trimmed open carriages filled with veiled women, and followed by several mounted eunuchs, a couple of companies of light infantry, along with a squad of lancers and cuirassiers wearing Saracen helmets.

We walked with the Viceroy into the court before the glittering palace. For the first time I saw the two buffaloes tied up on each side of the steps. Among the great families of Egypt it was customary to slay the animals on the return of a beloved relation, or a revered personage close to the family heart.

Just as De Lesseps and I crossed the threshold, three men at each buffalo eviscerated the animals in unison, disemboweling them expertly so that blood gushed as if from two-thousand pound vats, rushing in torrents along the especially prepared trench across which we were to walk.

De Lesseps strode across the blood-brimmed trench, head tilted, and smiling faintly. From the corner of his mouth, he whispered to me. 'Don't vomit. This is a very great honour.'

The Ayotollah Rais Fidafik was a Shiite priest with acute body odour. He smelled as if he'd been living with our

jackals at Ismailia. I don't know if he had removed his black cloak since the first moment of his robing, but the garment was greasy, stained and discoloured. He looked like an ancient Nathan calling God's vengeance on David, though of course he could never have been since that was entirely another religion.

Ismail Pasha had invited De Lesseps into a small latticed cubicle to be blessed by the Shiite priest and the Vicomte jerked his head, inviting me to accompany him.

Inside the breathless room, hung with rich Persian rugs on all walls and over the floors, the Ayotollah stood waiting, bathed in cleverly directed lamp light bounced from reflectors. I could not help thinking there are certainly tricks in every man's racket.

The Ayotollah extended his hand and De Lesseps knelt and kissed his knuckles. I followed suit. Only Ismail Pasha did not bow. He remained standing, watching us oddly. For the first time I began to understand what De Lesseps obviously had known all along, how false all this celebration and ceremony really was.

I glanced towards De Lesseps. He appeared cool, smiling and totally at ease. But I remembered reading that Marie Antoinette had gone to the headsman with her lovely little head held high.

The priest began to chant some involved and extended prayer in Arabic. He repeated certain words and then phrases over and over. Just when I decided it would go on forever, he ceased praying.

Ismail Pasha said in a mild tone, 'The Ayotollah Fidafik says the gods have spoken in the Isthmus. He says the gods are against you and against your canal.'

The Shiite priest nodded sagely. I recognised this as a moment of crisis, but all I could really think was that I wanted to get out of there and inhale a long draught of fresh air.

De Lesseps was superb. He smiled, not happily, but in a sad, understanding way. He kissed the priest's bony knuckles again. Then he straightened. He said in a tone of great good humour. 'His god is against me. My God is with me.'

'Allah is the only God,' Ayotollah Fidafik intoned. 'He is great. He is the one God. He is great. Allah Himself opposes your canal. It has been shown to you in Allah's own handwriting, in the death and pestilence and ruin at Ismailia.'

'I agree the storm – and most of the damage – was an Act of God, Devout One,' De Lesseps said. 'Which God I cannot say . . . I don't like to blame either your Allah or the Jehovah of my people. I prefer to think it was a fearful quirk of nature.'

'It is written all things unto Allah and all things from His hands. He does not wish you to build that canal.'

'I believe that God – Allah – means for me to dig His ditch across the Suez – for the great good and service of all mankind and to the enrichment and glory of Egypt and the Arabic world. I believe this, Devout one, with all my heart. God wants me to build that canal in His name, and I believe He will find a way.'

The Ayotollah lost his temper, and this made him sweat all the more, unfortunately. 'In the face of Allah's message – in the face of all that has happened – can you continue to believe this heresy?'

De Lesseps was calmer than ever, but smiling. He nodded. 'I do believe it,' he said. 'As I believe the sun will rise beyond Mecca in the morning.'

The Shiite priest stood with his thin fists clenched at his sides. 'The entire might and force of Islam shall oppose you, Infidel.'

De Lesseps knelt to his knee and bowed his head. He reached to take the Shiite priest's hand again, but Fidafik jerked his fist away. 'So be it, Devout one. May my love and Allah go with you.'

Ismail Pasha was less than imposing, even crusted in diamonds and surrounded by sycophants. What he looked like was a soft, fat-bellied, olive black-eyed man who lusted after little boys. There was in his eyes and about his moustached, carmine-lipped mouth a sated look of voluptuary corruption beyond even the most profligate and depraved European. His face and eyes said he had dipped into fleshpots unknown above the Mediterranean.

Ismail maintained his style as part sybarite and nation builder. He never stopped constructing bridges, railways, opera houses and palaces. He was having constructed in his name at Port Said an opulent theatre to house the opera being composed in Italy at this moment by Guiseppe Verdi. There was a rumour that he planned a bold military excursion southwards to annex a vast segment of Africa down to the Equator. He was the supreme authority in this region of the world, despite the Turkish Porte, and this showed in his face, too.

It was several hours of feasting and dancing and celebration, with incredible fireworks bursting across the sky, before we were summoned into private audience with his supreme highness, but that moment came.

As we walked along the brilliant tiles of the corridor towards the conference chamber, I whispered, 'His priests oppose you. How can he support you?'

'He'll support me because he must.'

'And yet it is common knowledge all over Europe that he has almost bankrupted the country investing in the canal – before the floods.'

'It is also a fact that last year Ismail Pasha spent nearly five million pounds on his harem. I cannot weep very much for him.'

'With his own priests opposing you, he has every reason to reject you now.'

He glanced at me and smiled. 'You forget, my dear friend – as I must not – that under terrible provocation men will be just, whether they wish to be or not.'

I laughed and shook my head. 'I pray you're right.'

'Yes. You pray. Youth requires more spiritual reassurances than old age. Virtue and resignation are diseases of the ageing.'

Ismail Pasha bowed towards me without concealing that he felt me an intruder. But he clasped De Lesseps in his arms and wept over him, so pleased was he to be in his company again.

'And yet things are not as I wish them, my dear old friend,' Ismail Pasha said. His black eyes chilled. In their icy glaze shone a forbidding virulence hardly even comprehensible to Europeans. His voice remained soft and warm and therefore

doubly unsettling and misleading. 'We all must make compromises . . . And in the commissioning of the canal – there shall be changes. There shall be, you understand?'

Ismail Pasha no longer smiled. He slapped a leather crop he carried hard across his palm as a final punctuation. He bowed his head in a curt gesture of dismissal and farewell. Before we could bow in return, he heeled around and strode towards the corridor door.

'Your highness.' De Lesseps' voice was low, even reticent, but something in its anguished anxiety and implied threat slowed the Viceroy and stopped him reluctantly across the room.

Ismail Pasha paused in the stippling of lamplight through a tall latticed window. With one dark hand on the crystal doorknob, Ismail Pasha turned and stared at De Lesseps, brow tilted. It was unconscionable that he be addressed after he'd terminated a meeting, and still he waited, indulgent, as with an unruly child.

I saw all De Lesseps' magnificent dreams dissolving in the sands of the Sinai Desert. Thirty years of dedication destroyed on the whim of this youthful despot. I felt a sympathetic sense of emptiness, and some compassion for the Vicomte, as well as mild triumph for this unexpected affirmation of my own government's unalterable position. We had a new ally in the highest and most unexpected place.

Intrigued, I watched the by-play between De Lesseps and the young regent. A taut sense of urgency spurred the ageing Frenchman who had to answer to budgets and auditors and investors abd deadlines and to mortality as well.

He smiled, seeming totally unaware of the seething rage swirling behind the smile that twisted the Pasha's dark face. In De Lesseps resided that youthful enthusiasm, vigour and eagerness that made him appear callow, awkward and even naîve facing the coldly placid Arab. The truth is, I suppose, that De Lesseps was obsessed by that holy grail of his own goal and saw nothing else. If he could believe that I, as Her Majesty's representative, shared his dream, how could he doubt the devotion of the young Viceroy whose people must benefit most from its realisation?

About the youthful Ismail Pasha there hung a dark air of

eternal serenity, even enraged as he was, a kind of sordid mystery that hid, behind that inscrutable smile, nameless orgies and ritual sacrifices older than recorded history, a reserve and condescension that belonged, if anywhere, to unbound perpetuity, to timelessness itself. The regent, in his twenties, appeared far older and more mature than De Lesseps, with that terrible and corrupt calm that was ageless, deathless, an almost tangible aura that permeated the atmosphere. It clouded in the very incensed air itself. It seemed to rise with the gray wisps of scented vapours, to filtrate from the silk draperies and from the hand-woven carpeting whose intricate patterns bore the curse of forgotten weavers' bleeding fingers. It showed most of all in the strange, exotic personality of Ismail Pasha himself. His smile was most friendly, contemporary, pragmatic and apparently forgiving of this incredible insult to his person and rank and authority. Yet if one were in the least sensitive, one saw the deadly chill deep in the black eyes, the cold, aloof, even disturbingly half-savage, shadowy disdain. The Viceroy was proud and fierce and independent, arrogant and boiling with resentments and centuries-buried venom and genetic malice against French benefactors. And what was unseen, unseeable, but guessed, became all the more disturbing in Ismail Pasha because he was a Copt with all the polish of English schooling, enlightened, urbane and genteel. It was as if he stood separated from us across an unbridgeable gulf of religious and ethnic estrangements and misunderstandings.

This quality most set Egyptians and Europeans apart, segregating them in the very instant of intimacy, searing and withering even closest camaraderie and interchange, mutating friendships into something unwholesome, unstable and mercurial. It was far more than what we've come to call the 'inscrutability of the Middle-East'. The explanation, if there were one, seemed to me rooted in the past – the truly unintelligible, unknowable past of the shadow people and Menes the Fighter and Snefru and Khafra whose face informs the Sphinx, and of Hambab and the Shepherd kings, to that same unrecorded age when the Celts and Gauls were trying to contrive some way to wrap and secure animal skins to keep their shoulders warm while the learned Egyptians pondered

seasons and ages and tides and constellations and with incredible accuracy solved innumerable mysteries of their universe. This hot, strange land itself belonged to that mystifying and unmeasurable past. Its people, even in 1863, still believed their homes on this earth to be merely inns for travellers towards that tomb-house of everlasting, and did not worry about *bukra* but lived in this immediate present and, if they looked forward at all, it was to the ancient stolen glories of Hatshepsut.

At last in the fragile silence, De Lesseps spoke, urgently and yet gently and calmly. 'We must not abandon our magnificent project now, your highness. I submit that we cannot. I have dealt in close friendship and trust and understanding with your brothers, father and uncles who preceded you in your unapproachable glory, back to the great Mehemet Ali himself. My own father spoke with Egyptian rulers about the need for a canal across the Suez to the glory with Egyptian rulers about the need for a canal across the Suez to the glory of Egypt and the service of mankind. From these ancestors of yours I have won the franchise and honour to build your canal, to your glory . . . Do not be timid, your excellency. I will take you beside me into immortality. With the completion of this greatest engineering feat of all times, our names shall resound through eternity. We shall never die. The canal shall be yours. The glory shall be yours.'

Ismail Pasha stared across the room at him. His chilled face said that he was indulging an old friend, but as far as he was concerned, the matter was closed, this side of bankruptcy.

De Lesseps fell silent and Ismail Pasha moved to turn the glittering door knob in his fist. The Vicomte's voice stopped him again.

'Will my dearest friend send me then to the Supreme Porte at Constantinople? To that place where sit as well as your admirers, enemies of yours and mine, as well as those we both know to be in sympathy and in league with the British against us? How will it profit you that the Porte rules against you? How will it reward you that someone else come in now – when we are within years of completing this greatest of all engineering triumphs – and takes from you glory and

honour – and profit – that is rightly yours and that I have always maintained is rightly yours?'

Ismail Pasha said nothing. He stared at De Lesseps for some moments. When the Vicomte did not speak again, the Viceroy opened the door and stepped through it into the corridor. He closed it quietly behind him, with only a whisper of sound.

A new dredge arrived at Ismailia from Germany and through his engineers, De Lesseps set crews of Egyptian labourers working in the shattered channel around the clock. It was as if there were not one dredge, but a legion of them. The smoke belched from its stacks, and sounds pounded through the compound all day, and the work moved forward by the inch.

I looked on De Lesseps, trying to find in him that betraying sign of defeat. There was no trace of surrender in him. The dead were buried, the jackals driven into retreat. I realised there was one reason why in the face of ruin De Lesseps did not quit. He could not quit.

No matter that De Lesseps and his engineers kept busy the labourers, and those new forces sent in to replace the deserters, the maimed, infected and dead, the work ground down to a halt. De Lesseps' investors, when they said anything, sent word that they could no longer throw good money after bad and that the whole enterprise must be totally re-evaluated.

'The fools, the stupid bloody fools,' Mougel said to me one day when we stood together on the veranda. 'They accuse the Vicomte of wasting money out here. He has husbanded their resources as no one could have required. His stubbornness alone has saved the company millions – as it will doubtlessly save them millions more – if we are allowed to proceed.'

'Oh?' I said.

Mougel nodded vehemently. 'You know, Hamilton, there could have been locks – a whole series of locks – the length of this canal. Think of the expense and delay. Whole corps of engineers – with the prestige of generations of surveyors and technicians behind them – insisted this canal could never be operative without locks. For once, Linant and I agreed, and with only our support, the Vicomte opposed them all, and won the right to build a sea-level canal. It will work. It will

sa . millions of pounds. And years in construction. Damn them! They must not be permitted to stop him.'

I shook my head. 'I'm afraid they've already accomplished that rather effectively.'

He peered at me from under the brim of his *sola topee*. 'You don't truly know the Vicomte, after all, do you, M'sieu?'

With each day that passed, one felt the tension intensify almost tangibly in the relentless heat. The supervisory personnel all seemed to be waiting, as did even De Lesseps himself, for the message that would rescue and reactivate them and their project. That word did not come. From the Viceroy's summer palace on the Place de l'Esbékie, there was only cold, formal silence. Credit became shaky and uncertain everywhere. Expected machinery did not arrive. Requisitions were not honoured. We received in every mail – from well-intentioned friends, I suppose, paving De Lesseps' path to hell – editorials from Paris newspapers denouncing De Lesseps' profligate waste of French sustenance in the worthless deserts of some unheard-of country of goats, nomads and gazelles. In France, they were calling the Vicomte a traitor.

And De Lesseps was not the only one being denounced for dishonesty of purpose and goal. Oriana missed no opportunity to comment to her father, the Vicomte and those at the dinner table on my nationality and what my true motives out here might be.

'I'm really out here only to buy myself a fresh-cheeked young boy at one of the slave auctions, Miss Ducelle,' I said.

Oriana's face flushed in the light of dinner candles, but she tilted her lovely little chin defiantly and said, 'I wonder that the Vicomte can trust you as he does.'

De Lesseps laughed and patted her hand. 'Tony is my friend. It is not a matter of politics or nationality. It's not a matter of trust or distrust. I am aware that Tony represents the British government and that Her Majesty's hirelings blindly oppose and combat everything I wish to do. But in Tony I see something far more. His is not the rigid, closed and prejudiced mind. He has vision and foresight, as I do. He can see – with me – the need for progress, the urgency of better trade and commercial routes out here.'

'And you believe he does not report to his supporters all he sees – and hears – out here?' Oriana inquired, her voice quivering.

'My dearest Oriana,' De Lesseps said. 'What could any enemy of ours report to the British Home Office that those revered gentlemen could not read of my trials in the London *Times*?' He shook his head. 'I've known Tony for nine or ten years now. Since he first came out here. In all those years, I've seen nothing he may have come upon that was confidential used against me in the British arsenal.'

'I never said he wasn't clever,' Oriana said in her coldest tone.

'And pretty,' I said. 'Once you said I was pretty.'

The men around the table smiled politely, teasing Oriana. But De Lesseps spoke quite seriously to her. 'In fact, in all those years it has been I who have tried to convert Tony.'

'And in all those years I have promised him nothing,' I said, smiling.

De Lesseps nodded. 'That's true. And I've made no demands upon him. Not even the impossible requirement that he put our friendship above his loyalty to his country. I wouldn't ask that. I believe that Tony will see the truth, and that he will forcefully convey that truth to my enemies in the British government. I truly believe that Tony Hamilton may be the key to my final triumph out here.'

'I myself expect nothing so gaudy,' I said.

'In the meantime,' Oriana said. 'I should sleep with one eye open while Mr Hamilton is our guest, Vicomte.'

De Lesseps laughed. 'No, no, Oriana. Perhaps I am not the judge of men that you are. And naturally, I don't have your woman's intuition when all else fails. But I believe Tony Hamilton – whatever else he is – including British – is an honest man. I admire honesty, no matter on which side of the English Channel I find it. One finds so little honesty any more.' He shrugged. 'And anyway, Oriana, no one can stop me out here. I fear no one. Friend or enemy. I shall not be stopped.'

'And you, Mr Hamilton, what is it you find so admirable in Vicomte De Lesseps?' Oriana inquired, staring coldly into my face.

'Tenacity,' I said.

'Tenacity?'

'I remind him of his pit bulls,' De Lesseps said.

'I admire tenacity, Miss Ducelle.' I said. 'Almost above all else. Probably because Vicomte De Lesseps epitomises tenacity, while I myself have so little of it.'

In the first rubescent glow of false dawn, I saw Oriana ride out alone on her gray Arabian. She wore a *sola topee* along with her usual muslin shirt and cotton pants stuffed into riding boots. She handled the animal well, going swiftly across the broken land and following the shattered channel of the canal.

Dressing as quickly as possible, gargling a mouthful of bitters which I spat out as I hurried across the compound, I commandeered a saddle horse, waiting impatiently while an Egyptian handler got it ready.

Securing my own topee by its strap under my chin, I swung into the saddle and rode off in pursuit of Oriana, even while I told myself what a fool I was. I was pursuing that impossible bewitchment, a second chance at youth. I could no longer pretend that I was not entranced. The faint trace of her perfume haunted me. The memory of her face seduced my dreams. The sound of her voice was the melody that had penetrated my brain and spun there.

I assured myself as my mount raced recklessly across the savaged plain that I was not foolishly infatuated with a girl young enough to be my daughter. No, indeed. What I told myself was that she misjudged me, misread my motives and miscalculated my masculinity.

I even had sense enough to ask myself, as I pounded along the washboard flats, why did it matter what such a young girl thought of me? Well, I didn't like her insinuations about my lack of manhood. I wanted to set her straight, that was all, and once that matter was settled, accounts between us would be closed. I had spent most of my life pursuing the fair sex, and it seemed less than reasonable that in my fortieth year I should be stigmatised as a closet pervert. After all, one hint from Oriana to an old acquaintance like Vicomte De Lesseps and he regarded me in a wholly new way. This was not to be tolerated.

I saw her ahead of me and sank my heels into the horse's flanks.

She must have sensed my approach, or perhaps felt the vibrations of racing horse's hooves on the hard earth. She turned and looked back over her shoulder.

I waved to her. Oriana paused just long enough, I suppose, to recognise me in the distance. She bent low, urging her magnificent animal to excesses of speed. And so we raced foolheartedly, risking neck and horse, along the shimmering waterway.

The sun illumined the far reaches of the horizon. The heat was becoming intense. My horse already slavered. I realised I could never overtake her, though I pursued her north to Port Said. The most I might accomplish was to have her horse stumble in a hole, break its leg and her neck.

Just as I was reining in, I saw her slow her own mount in the clouds of dust ahead of me. I suppose reason and common sense had returned to her, too. She would rather confront me than endanger her horse.

She paused in the broken remnants of an ancient oasis with a dry well surrounded by twisted palms.

I rode in swiftly and swung down from the saddle recklessly like some ardent swain of twenty. I was flushed and panting, and my horse heaved and dripped saliva.

She watched me coldly as though she'd never encountered me before, or if she had, she could not remember where or when. 'Why have you tried to kill that horse?' she said. 'Riding him like that in this heat? What do you want?'

'You woke me up,' I said, 'when you rode shouting past my window.'

She did not smile. Her dark face was suffused with blood, and fury crackled in her dark eyes. Simmering with rage, she was unaware that her abrupt anger and fiery temper gave her face a look of heated and sensuous beauty. But I was aware of her loveliness, as I was of her hatred. 'You lie,' she said, her voice quavering. 'I ride every morning. I rode silently. I never gave you a thought.'

'We both lie,' I said, in a mocking tone. 'You do think about me. You know you do.'

Her head jerked up and she spoke irritably. 'If I were a

little while infatuated with you – when I thought you were a real man – I am quite recovered.'

'Are you? Then why are you afraid even to talk to me?'

'I'm not afraid to talk to you. I've nothing to say to you.'

She tried to stare me down, but I only returned her gaze with a twisted smile that infuriated her. 'Well, I have something to say to you.' And I admitted now that I was lying. I had nothing that should be said to this lovely young creature. I should never have followed her here, I should remount my tired horse and leave while I had shreds of dignity at least. If I could not get her out of my mind for a while? Well, she was not the first female to have affected me so passionately and deeply, either.

'Anything you have to say to me, Mr Hamilton, can be said in the presence of my father and his friends.'

'My God.' I said. 'How formal. Who's wearing the stuffed shirt this morning?'

'What have you to say to me? You do wish I'd leave this place for my health's sake? Don't be so concerned with my health, Mr Hamilton.'

'Most people call me Tony.'

'I'm sure they do, Mr Hamilton.'

'And when I suggested you escape this place of cholera and contagion, I was thinking of your best interests, not mine. You're young and beautiful, and I know you think you'll live forever, but you don't have immunity to contagion – no one does.'

'And it would be nice if I went to school – and improved myself – wouldn't it, Mr Hamilton?'

I shrugged. 'There's a great big world out there. There's much to learn. Much to see.'

'I appreciate your interest. And I also fully comprehend your subtle implication that – ignorant and unlettered as I am – I could never interest such a man of the world, even if you *were* interested in women.'

'Oh, my God,' I said. 'Is that where my good intentions have placed me with you? Well, if you have no further time for me, I insist that you listen to me now – '

'I am not interested in anything you have to say.'

'Well, I'm interested. I like to talk about myself. I find me infinitely entertaining and amusing.'

'Oh, I'm sure you do, and that is probably *another* reason why – at almost forty – you have never married.' Those disdainful black eyes raked across me.

I shrugged and nodded. 'Another of the reasons, though I must submit that the reasons you do impute to me – perverted lechery after young boys, and sexual interest only in my own sex – are not quite true. I don't know why it matters to me that you believe the truth, but it does. Perhaps I don't like the insinuations you make about my manhood. I am not very much. I have so little. If you take that from me I am an empty bag indeed.'

She merely stared at me. I exhaled heavily and said, 'I can say to you in all honesty that I have been in love – deeply and devotedly and passionately – with young ladies, and even some of their mothers, in numbers I suppose you would find decadent.'

'I simply am not interested.'

'Of course. Well, a man hardly lives to his fortieth year in a vacuum, does he, unless perhaps he's a Trappist monk? And I never was. I considered and rejected the holy estate of matrimony many times – '

'I'm sure you did.'

'Again, not for any of the reasons you insist upon smearing me with – '

'Smearing? I don't smear anyone, Mr Hamilton. If the truth happens to leave stains or smears – '

I spoke with sudden anger. 'I don't know why I bother with this. You're right, it does not matter what you believe about me. But you shall hear this, whether you believe it or not, whether you care or not. I shall say it once, and I shall say it no more. You shall have the facts, and I don't give a damn what you do with them.'

'You're lovely when you're angry,' she taunted.

'Then I've never been prettier.' I felt my jaw tighten and my face went as hard as steel, but I managed to keep my voice velvety soft. 'I have spent my life in the strangest capitals of the strangest nations on this strange earth. I have spent most of my life on boats going somewhere or re-

turning somewhere. I have never stayed in one place, since I entered the consular service, for more than one year. Strange people. Strange houses. Strange customs. Strange hotels. Strange menus. That has been my lot. I have not complained. I am not complaining now. It is the career I consciously chose and I have given to it the best I could. But I never felt I had the right to ask any woman to share my gypsy life.'

'Not even if she loved you?'

'Especially not if she loved me.'

'Not even if you loved her?'

'That's what I am trying to say. I never loved a woman that much, or hated one deeply enough to condemn her to such a rootless, empty existence. That's all I have to say. I have been often lonely. Often alone. But I have not regretted my decision. I have not dragged some poor woman half across the world, trailing kitchen curtains and hope chests and sterling silver forever needing polish.'

She walked away from me to the abandoned, dry well. She sat on a stone and idly tossed pebbles into the empty cistern. She spoke with a hard irony. 'And perhaps that's why I threw myself at your head that night. And I apologise. I, too, have spent my entire life moving from one hotel, from one construction site to another, from one remote country to another. I have packed away fresh kitchen curtains, and even good silver, and the hope for a home – permanent and in one place – wherever I have gone . . . But I could not settle down with just any man – '

'You have plenty of time,' I began.

She leaped up and swung her arm angrily in a cutting, downward gesture. 'Oh, what do you know about it? You are right. We were never meant for each other. For all the reasons you have confessed, and for all those I believe about you.'

Suddenly angered, I felt my face flush hot. I stared at her in frustration. It did not matter what I said to her, she would believe her own wild impressions. 'My God,' I said. 'Do you believe the only reason a man can resist you is because he is a homosexual?'

She shrugged. 'You have already told me it doesn't matter what I believe.'

Raging, I stared at her, wanting to hate her – for being

adamant, for being so damnably young, for being lost to me, but the sight of her vulnerable, fresh and saucy loveliness did nothing to calm me. In that instant, staring at her muslin shirt and cotton pants, I knew she would not have been more alluring to me in a party gown. I followed the slender line of her throat to the supple rise of her high, round breats rippling fluidly beneath the cheap fabric of her waist. I saw the flat narrow girth, the flare of her hips, the way her cotton riding pants cupped at her thighs, the slender browned hands, the sensual curve of that untouched young mouth. I wanted to cry out in agony, I wanted to get on that horse and ride away from her, I wanted to take her in my arms and never let her go.

I looked about, finding hot irony in the setting. Here we were, as lovers might walk beside the Seine under the horse chestnut trees, or loiter along the Embankment in sight of Waterloo Bridge. And here we were, in a sun-struck, dead oasis, by a dry, abandoned well and the remnants of a flooded channel. Inside I knew the truth. We were as doomed as this ignoble place.

I reached out and caught her arms in my hands, drawing her against me. She must have seen fury and cruelty in my face rather than desire because I could not hide my helpless anger and frustration.

She tried to struggle free but I would not let her go. A trembling wracked her body, and my own hands seemed to tingle in response to the shock of sensation that shook her.

'Damn you,' I whispered, my voice oddly hoarse and unfamiliar in my own thundering ears. 'It may not matter. And you may not care. But by God, you shall know.'

Somehow, even without conscious intent, I slid my hand down her arm and caught her wrist. I pulled her hand down between us. I heard her startled gasp but I did not stop. I drew her hand upon the rigidity of my fly and roughly held it there, forcing her to hold it. For one insane, mindless moment, we stood unmoving while the world and the heat and the silence retreated and we stood close in some exotic, vital place of our own discovery.

'There,' I said between gritted teeth. 'Are you satisfied that I could have taken you if I would have?'

The sound of my voice seemed to free her. She jerked her hand away and lunged free, her face taut and pale, her eyes blazing. She threw up her arm and would have struck me across the face with her riding crop, but I caught the leather weapon in my fist.

Her voice seemed to rasp from her tight throat. She stared up at me, unblinking, unyielding, unearthly beautiful and desirable. 'Don't you ever touch me again.'

'Ah,' I mocked her, 'so there is a world between the needs of seventeen and forty, eh? Do you believe me now? Well, you're right. It doesn't matter what you think of me. Think what you will. But now when you speak of me, you will speak the truth. When you remember me, you'll remember the truth. And when you dream of me, you will dream of me as I am.'

'I hate you,' she whispered.

I bowed. 'Of course you do. The truth has set you free, Mademoiselle . . . Go ahead. You may go now . . . I won't try to stop you. I've said all I have to say to you.'

She walked unsteadily in the hot sand to her horse. She swung up into the saddle and turned her mount towards the camp, without looking back. I did not move. When she was gone, the oasis was hot and empty, a dead place in a lifeless world. There were no more words to be spoken between us. She had gone back to her dreams of seventeen, and I was left behind in a new hell of my own making. . . . She was free.

And for me, there was no escape.

# IV

LOUIS NAPOLEON III'S Imperial Yacht lay gently at anchor in the harbour at Port Said. *L'Aigle* rode imperiously in a swarming of tourists, sightseers, the curious and the hungry. Flatboats, dinghys, yachts, sailing sloops and cutters hove-to as closely as they dared to the floating palace. Multitudes littered land and water around the ship. Eager people crowded every deck and all along the quay. It looked as if all the world and his wife had turned out hoping for a glimpse of Napoleon's glamorous lady. Princess Eugenie was still the most exciting, the most talked, gossiped and written-about woman in the western world. Everybody longed to see her, if only for an instant, in the flesh.

We in De Lesseps' party – including Oriana who remained silent and withdrawn in my presence – came up the Nile from Cairo on a steam-driven paddlewheeler which looked more bedraggled and paint-peeled the nearer it approached the French Imperial Yacht. De Lesseps had been in conference with his advisers since we had boarded the riverboat after crossing the desert from Ismailia. These harried men, aware of the threat, portent and minacity in this summons from the Emperor Napoleon went over and over the same fruitless tracts, looking for promise in areas where there was none. Each of these men – without exception – engineers, financial and technical advisers, all idolised De Lesseps and believed in his dream with all their minds and hearts and souls. Yet there was a tension about them. They saw doom clouding ahead in the sunlit, cloudless day.

I admit to this present moment the unexpected sense of excitement that coursed through me like static charges as our unlovely old craft steamed and plodded its way into

view of the magnificent *l'Aigle*, all its pennants and flags and tricolour ensigns whipping in the wind.

Our ugly old paddlewheeler finally backed and shuddered its way to anchor at the docks and our entire party was transferred to power-driven auxiliary craft from *l'Aigle* which were equipped, polished and finished like small, self-contained yachts.

I found much to intrigue me in this moment of crisis for De Lesseps. I was as aware as he that he and his great project might well face the *coup de grâce* today aboard the French Imperial Yacht.

Far more unsettling and disturbing to me was the fact that I was going to see Eugenie Marie De Montijo De Guzman, Countess of Teba, Princess of France, again after almost twenty years. I would be once more in her exhilarating and vivacious company for a few moments at least. I was certain Eugenie had long ago forgotten me. Our first meeting had been brief. But her memory, the faint yet persistent trailing of her distinctive perfume, had followed me across the world from that first transient encounter in London. She had been nineteen then, as lovely and fragile as Spanish porcelain and, as the Countess of Teba, the sensation of the élite world of the continent.

Standing, crowded between gawking and gibbering people, at the port railing of the auxiliary boat, I went back in my mind, across time and space to that day in Belgravia when I – along with half the men in Europe – fell under the spell of the Spanish lady. With the other males, it may have been the passing thrill of the impossible fantasy, but with me it was more, far more. My desire for her was basic, physical and passionate. From the first sight of her alabaster skin and deep, flirtatious eyes and voluptuous Spanish mouth, I wanted her carnally, desperately and recklessly. Like the canal across the Suez with the cosmic-minded De Lesseps, the Countess of Teba became my undying obsession. Not time, nor space, nor her tragic *mésalliance* with Louis Napoleon, tamed, softened or tempered my desire.

At twenty, and down for a holiday from the university I had gone along reluctantly to that reception in the *salon* of the Countess of Moorheath. This lady was then past fifty

and still impressively beautiful, as well as ebulliently horny for handsome young men. One was forever being regaled with stories of her love affairs and devastating minor scandals attributed to her. I had never been in her bed, but I *could* have been, and I liked the old girl, found her truly fascinating. And in her parlour one met the cream of cosmopolitan society, as well as the popular writers, painters and poets of the moment, and also the most exciting of the steady flow of political exiles from the continent.

Of course I had heard of the Countess de Teba, but I had not even dreamed what she would be like in person. I don't think one can know such things in advance. One hears stories, rumours, gossip and paens of praise, but nothing quite prepares one for the first splendid moment of encounter. I saw her, I was introduced to her, I danced with her – and I was lost.

She was unlike any other girl I had ever met, or ever would meet. At sixteen she had smoked a cigarette at a bullfight in Madrid, outraging polite Spanish society in that year of 1842.

When I first saw Eugenie she was telling a fascinated group of her strange and unique special powers. She could remember events which took place before her birth. She said she had told Prosper Mérimée that when she wanted anything strongly enough she knew how to make the earth quake.

I listened, enthralled to this daughter of the Count of Montijo and an American woman of Scottish origin, claiming descent from the grandfather of Robert Bruce, the Scots king. At her baptismal ceremony she'd been given the names Maria Eugenia Ignacia Augustina, but was known always as Eugenie.

At the age of eight, because of a cholera epidemic in Malaga following the Carlist wars, Eugenie's mother took her to Paris for the first time. She and her sister were sent to the Convent of the Sacred Heart in the Rue de Varennes. Eugenie's mother created a strangely bohemian *salon* in Paris under the guidance of Prosper Mérimée who got from her the idea for his novel and the later opera of Bizet called *Carmen.*

It was Mérimée who told her that Louis Napoleon, nephew of the exiled Emperor, had planned a *coup d'état* from Strasbourg against Louis-Phillipe. The uprising had failed miserably and the gentle king had exiled Louis Napoleon to America rather than executing him, or there would never have been an Empress Eugenie.

At her father's death, she, her sister and her mother were left extremely wealthy and the mother set out, quite openly, to find the most suitable husbands for her daughters.

I can see Eugenie now in the *salon* at Countess Moorheath's Belgravia mansion. Eugenie was taller than her dark sister, a true Spanish beauty, and she was fair, with the red-golden hair from Scottish genes and highland blue eyes, and the most sensuous mouth I had ever encountered. She wafted, radiant, across the brilliantly illumined ballroom to unheard music and quickened heartbeats in every adoring male chest. She looked as if that lovely golden head had been set upon the graceful neck and the perfection of her lithe young body after every precise consideration of effect, shock value, and symmetry. She looked as if she'd cost any man a tidy sum and be worth every exorbitant penny of it.

Eugenie was quite frank and open with me about her mother's studied campaign and cold-blooded quest for the very best marriage contract possible for Eugenie and her sister. 'I'm expensive baggage, Tony,' she said, her laughter teasing me. 'I will cost some man a great deal of money.'

I stared down at her, totally entranced and sad with loss. 'You mean you would marry some boring and insensitive brute of an old man – simply for money and position?'

She laughed, and I heard angels' violins. 'Of course. Marriage isn't the end of the world, my darling. And, anyway, my dear Tony, I'm afraid the truth is, I am not very interested in young men, no matter how handsome, or ardent. I'm afraid only men of great accomplishment and great affluence, success and power, intrigue me very much. So it won't be as bad as it seems.'

Through that evening I watched her laughter, heard her chatting about attending bullfights in Madrid and smoking publicly, and riding Andulasian ponies, bareback and

astride. An audible gasp was the reaction. 'The Countess of Teba – bareback and astride?'

The night ended prematurely for me with the arrival of the Bonaparte Pretender who was then living in exile in London. He was a persistent devil, we heard. Returning from America, he had attempted a second *coup* at Boulogne, followed by failure, arrest and life sentence in the fortress of Ham.

But, here he was in London, and he strode in, rude and aggressive and condescending. He went directly to Eugenie, claimed her hand, moved with her into the conservatory where the doors were closed behind them, and I did not see her again.

Except in my dreams. That night I knew that Eugenie, Countess de Teba, was the one woman for whom I had been seeking. I went home, madly in love for the first time in my life.

I was at least intelligent enough to know I could never have her for very long. I had neither the resources, the social prominence, the elegance or the affluence to make that possible. But perhaps I could have her – just once – in a scented bed somewhere. If I could use her body and her mouth in every erotic manner erupting in my boiling fantasies, then – and then only – I would be complete. I vowed, quite seriously, I assure you, that I would make any sacrifice, accomplish any goal, commit any crime, cuckold any man, for the pleasure of one night in the bed of the Countess of Teba. No matter whom I betrayed, hurt or destroyed – including myself, the price was reasonable.

Empress Eugenie was even lovelier at thirty-nine than she had been at nineteen. The dewiness, the fragile porcelain freshness, the girlish ardour, had been displaced by a soft radiance, a glow which came as much from her heart as from expensive and exotic emoluments imported from remote corners of the earth, or goats milk rinses, honey and beer face treatments, and the constant attention of the leading cosmetologists of Paris.

She sat in a throne-like chair in what proved to be the smaller of two *salons* aboard *l'Aigle*, temporary royal

reception chambers, made regal by her presence. She smiled in welcome and the smile illumined the world and set Roman candles exploding inside my chest. She wore a pale beige crinoline gown as if she were in the cool of Paris and not the sweated hell of Port Said. Its wide skirts spilled about her trim ankles and weightless slippers. Her gown, flounced in real lace, was worn low across the bodice and off-the-shoulder. Her hair shone with all its natural highlights many times restored and her alabaster flesh gleamed in the elegantly lighted stateroom.

Eugenie had invited De Lesseps to visit her briefly before his audience with the Emperor. De Lesseps invited Oriana and me to accompany him. 'You may find it diverting, Tony, to see our royalty are lovely, not dowdy as they are across the Channel.' And to Oriana he said with an indulgent and loving smile, 'a real live Empress. In the flesh. It is not everyday you see one of those.'

'I should be paralysed with fright,' Oriana protested.

De Lesseps shook his head. 'Perhaps you'll feel more at ease if you remember Eugenie is my cousin.'

'Do you suggest this would make her mortal?' Oriana asked in her most flattering and adulatory tone.

De Lesseps laughed. 'Oh, she's mortal, even if I'm not.'

Walking along the formally – cardinal red – carpeted deck to the Empress's salon with Oriana and De Lesseps just ahead of me, I suddenly recalled in the midst of my anticipatory delight at seeing Eugenie again, that the Empress certainly *was* De Lesseps' cousin – and in the recent past had been far more than that to him. She had been his mistress for what surely must be reckoned an extraordinary and incredible duration – a rumoured fifteen years, according to my sources. Few of her affairs persisted through an entire week. She ran through hats, slippers, men and *chemises* with the same uncaring élan.

Watching the heavy shouldered, youthfully striding De Lesseps walk along ahead of me, I realised he definitely met and exceeded even the rigid criteria expounded by Eugenie in her girlhood: he was powerful, had accomplished a miracle in Africa, and swaggered through success and failure in Spain and Italy, climbing always towards

immortality whatever he did. And until recently he had been affluent. It was officially reported inside British Home Office communiqués that he had invested or pledged his entire fortune to the last penny in the Suez company. He stood head and shoulders above even those, noble, philanthropic, baronial, three-tailed bashaw, magnate, celebrated and renowned, who alone could turn her head, hold her attention, intrigue her.

I exhaled heavily. He certainly exceeded all her standards and he had reaped all rewards and benefits and privileges, in Eugenie's bed – for fifteen *years*, for God's sake! No wonder he felt himself superior to ordinary mortals, one of God's chosen, believed he could not fail, and demanded deference from kings, sheiks and pashas alike. Which one of *them* had enslaved, entranced and delighted the Empress of France for almost two decades? Which one indeed?

'Fernando! My dearest Fernando!' Eugenie cried. She put out her hand and he knelt before it and touched her knuckles with his lips. 'Your kiss sets me afire, my darling,' she said.

'Your highness is too kind,' he said.

She pretended to pout. 'I shouldn't be kind at all. I've missed you, Fernando. And I had to come all the way from Paris – in this miserable heat – just to get a glimpse of you.'

'Perhaps Louis-Napoleon will give you my head,' he said. 'When it is retrieved from the guillotine basket.'

'Oh, rot. You'll outlive them all, my darling young Fernando.'

'Well, if they want me to die,' he said, 'they will have to kill me.'

'No. Oh, no. No. I have reserved to myself – as Empress of France – the sole right to kill you . . . And I shall accomplish it in the most delightful ways.'

'I look forward to dying, highness.'

She laughed that lovely sound. 'At your convenience, cousin.'

De Lesseps, looking somehow younger than ever, introduced Oriana to the Empress. Oriana curtsied and was indeed speechless. Eugenie gave her a brief, kindly smile and moved her gaze to me.

'A friend of mine,' De Lesseps said. 'An Englishman, but reasonable, far-sighted, discerning and – '

'Oh, my God,' said the Empress. 'Tony Hamilton. Is that really you, Tony?'

I saw from the corner of my eye that Oriana stiffened and paled at the delight in the Empress's voice.

I was stunned and disbelieving. I could not conceive that the lady had remembered me after twenty years. I had supposed that after twenty minutes I was out of her mind, forgotten and misplaced among the trivia of her wasted evenings in Belgravia. I suppose this is the full essence of her charm, charisma and attractiveness, as much as her patrician beauty and imperishable lustre. She looked at you, she listened to you, and she remembered you.

'My dear lady,' I said, kneeling before her. 'You are so kind to remember.'

'Oh, I never forgot you, Tony. You were such a handsome youth, and you didn't take yourself so deadly serious as most English university types did. You were a handsome boy – you were almost too pretty – '

'I'm sure everyone told him that,' Oriana said under her breath so that only I heard her.

Eugenie didn't hear her; since Oriana was female, Eugenie was barely aware of her. Smiling at me, swimming in memories and nostalgia for a time lost and gone Eugenie went on, 'But you've become a handsome and distinguished looking man. Charming. Strong, yet tender – '

'Devastating,' Oriana muttered in terrible irony.

'I've thought of you so often in all these years, dearest Tony.' Eugenie said.

'I'm very flattered. Incredulous. But flattered.'

'I'm afraid I shall be ill,' Oriana mumbled in that low, ironic tone. She smiled, curtsied to the Empress, and excused herself.

'What a lovely child,' Eugenie said watching Oriana walk away. She smiled crookedly gazing at De Lesseps and me. 'Whose protégé is she?'

'I'm afraid she's too young for what you suggest, Cousin,' De Lesseps said.

'Perhaps for you, Cousin. I can't believe a man who has

drunk at the wells of Madrid, Rome, Paris and points south could be aroused by fresh-faced virginity. But you, Tony. I recall you as reckless and passionate.'

'You have catalogued me exactly, highness. Passionate. Reckless. And I am as passionate and reckless as ever, but I'm almost forty. I have learned to leash my passions.'

'Oh, have you? My deepest sympathies to you,' Eugenie teased. Then her arch gaze fixed itself on my face. 'How old is she?'

'Seventeen, I think, your highness.' I smiled. 'Seventeen going on thirty-seven.'

Eugenie laughed. 'So many modern young women are like that these days. Born knowing more than we older women will ever learn in a lifetime.'

'I believe you were quite clever at seventeen, Princess,' I said. And De Lesseps laughed in agreement.

Eugenie tapped at my shoulder with her fan. 'Why, Tony, how *gauche* of you. I was not speaking of myself, of course. I was speaking of ordinary women.'

I smiled, bowing. 'No one could ever accuse you of having been ordinary, Empress.'

She laughed. 'I certainly hope not. God knows I've done all I could to keep them from saying it, even from thinking it.'

Louis Napoleon III awaited De Lesseps in the larger of the ship's royal *salons*. He did not look particularly pleased to see that I accompanied the Vicomte, but De Lesseps remained totally at ease. What a monarch liked or disliked moved him not at all. De Lesseps had invited me to the conference as his guest, and the Emperor of France would simply have to accept it.

'I fear that some of the things I have to say to you may well be less than flattering, Cousin Fernando,' Louis Napoleon said. 'Perhaps you should not feel we ought to burden Mr Hamilton with them. Perhaps you should like to hear what I have to say in private?'

'You mean Tony?' De Lesseps smiled and shook his head. 'Tony is quite aware of my errors and failures, your highness. He is British and draws great comfort from my

tribulations, agony of defeat and degradation. Whatever you have to say to me may amuse Tony, and it will not embarrass me in the least.'

'Then you have grown a thicker skin than I can credit,' the Emperor said.

De Lesseps nodded. 'I have indeed, highness. I have been hurt and grieved, savaged, denounced and villified, disparaged and castigated by experts. Once, my heart broke, then it grew scar tissue to protect itself. Esteem and acclaim warm my cockles, but calumny touches me not at all any more.'

The Vicomte continued to smile as he spoke, but there was no warmth in his tone. He spoke jocularly, and yet it was as if he warned and threatened his monarch. It seemed he said there was a boundary beyond which he would permit no one to go, even Louis Napoleon III, Emperor of the Second Empire.

The ruler shifted slightly on his uncomfortable throne. I'm afraid I gazed with some intentness at the Emperor, this man whom the Catholic Eugenie had married for better or worse, knowing that in her Church she was embarking on a journey down a road from which she could not turn back.

The Emperor's wan, lined face was fat and round as his grandfather's had been, without its character as so vividly depicted in every painting. Louis Napoleon was the son of Josephine's daughter, by her first husband. He'd been born Charles Louis Napoleon Bonaparte at Paris in April, 1808. Now, at fifty-five, he looked at least seventy, aged, sated and self-indulgent. He compared most unfavourably with De Lesseps who was three years older and looked at least twenty-five years younger. The regent's salt-powdered moustache, waxed at the ends, drooped in his pale face under an aquiline nose, another paternal inheritance. His beard was trimmed in the style publicised as 'imperial'. His hair, once a mousey brown was fading, despite the frantic ministrations of barbers and stylists. He was getting old.

There was about him that arrogant air of aloofness which had first impressed me twenty years ago in Belgravia. He seemed remote, impersonal and impassive, his gray eyes small and dull and lustreless. He was under five feet five

inches tall, though royal publicists and heel wedges always added an inch or two. Eugenie always looked elegantly stately and regal when they stood together, while he resembled more than anything a dumpy little pot-bellied French-Sicilian. Perhaps this explained why they seldom stood together any more at state functions, though I had heard that Eugenie still wore low-heeled slippers out of deference to her regal master.

I had thought that Louis Napoleon would launch into a diatribe on the failures and accidents and disasters in the Suez desert, but he did not. Instead, he warmed into a litany of the woes assaulting him in Paris.

He let De Lesseps and me go on standing at the foot of the raised and carpeted dais, though there were chairs placed for a semi-circular audience. At first, Louis Napoleon remained seated in his throne, his voice whining and dripping self-pity, a melodramatic device obviously created and honed in Italy.

'As you know, Cousin, I have had to assist Italy to establish herself in its war against Austria. At great cost. There was no other course for me, as there was no other avenue open when I was forced to sue early for peace with the Austrians, alienating Victor Emmanuel.

'That damnable snake. He counted for nothing that through my intervention we were able to annex Savoy and Nice. He came out well, I tell you. But to hear Victor Emmanuel tell it, I betrayed him and his nation! Well, to hell with that. To hell with him. The important thing is that the military engagement cost us dearly.

'As you know, I have tried at great sacrifice and total devotion, to establish a Catholic empire in the New World under French guidance and to this end, I am pressing a Mexican expedition which will seat Maximillian on the throne, open new trade and commerce and resources. But my God, at such a cost to our treasury.'

He stood up and walked down the steps, prowling the state room. 'A further expense has been our intervention in the Polish insurrection. Ah, there have been great losses, in men, material and money.

'Even if I had not these pressing and overwhelming

expenses, we must remain militarily strong against our enemies. We find ourselves surrounded by enemies. The Prussians threaten both Alsace and Lorraine – and we are deeply committed to the security of these regions. They are French! They shall remain French, at all costs.

'There are others making demands upon our treasury and our friendship. Ambassadors from the Confederate States of America besiege me with pleas for military and financial assistance. Our sympathies certainly lie with them. New Orleans is like a French city, and always will be. But such actions will be ruinously costly, and yet we must not turn our backs upon our friends in this evil and perilous world.

'What I am trying to say to you is – and a fact quite well-known to our English allies across the Channel – the Second Empire is nearly bankrupt. Oh, we shall survive. We shall persist, but we are spread thin, we are committed – both financially and morally – on all fronts. What I am saying to you, there is no longer any money for luxuries, for special interests, for unnecessary expenditures.'

'Special interests. Luxuries. Unnecessary expenditures,' De Lesseps mused in a low, cold voice. 'Somehow, I feel you are talking about the Suez Canal.'

'God knows we can get along without it.'

'Can we, highness? The riches of the orient are opened to you with that canal, savings in shipping times of thousands of miles. Countries, resources, areas, seas opened to you beyond your wildest imaginings. I cannot see this as luxury, unnecessary, nor the selfish demands of special interests.'

'Well, the damned ditch is bankrupting us. Now you have been stopped dead in your tracks. What will it take to move you forward again? Eh? What? Amounts of fresh capital greater than have already been thrown down the rat hole?'

'Rat hole, your highness?'

'Well, I opposed the whole idea from the first, you know that.'

'And yet, you must also be well aware, highness, that completion of the canal, at whatever sacrifice, will solve all of your problems, military, financial, social and political.'

'You see a miracle in that ditch, don't you?'

'I do not become discouraged at temporary setbacks, sire.'

'Well, perhaps you don't, but I do. Perhaps because I am wiser than you. I can see beyond the end of my nose. I can see something besides my own self-interest. The fact is, De Lesseps, I have come down here for a single purpose, to advise you that we are unable to waste further funds on a useless ditch which I never really believed could be completed in the first place.'

We returned solemnly down the Nile aboard our steam-driven paddlewheeler and crossed the arm of the desert to Ismailia. If De Lesseps had any resources left, or designs for saving his project, he did not share them with us. He remained alone most of the time in a kind of voluntary exile. If we around him talked at all, it was in the tones reserved for funerals, wakes and wedding ceremonies. We said only what must be said. One could not surely say that De Lesseps admitted defeat yet, but he returned from Port Said diminished, humiliated and humbled – as much as he would ever be on this earth.

I watched him closely for outward signs of despair, desperation and despondency, but his face and attitude remained confident, buoyant. Only his unaccustomed silence betrayed his inner anxieties.

I invited Oriana to walk the narrow confines of the freighter's deck with me, but she refused. 'If you are afraid of my attacking you again,' I said, 'put your mind at ease. We Hamiltons make many mistakes, but never the same one twice. It's a family scruple with us.'

She regarded me oddly, at least there was a look in her gamine eyes that confounded me. There was about her, and had been since her audience with the Empress Eugenie, a new demureness, a strange gravity and solemnity. She seemed hardly the same little half-wild desert creature who had so fiercely intrigued me on first sight, despite my common sense and reason. 'I am not afraid of your attacking me,' she said in a grave voice. 'I never have been. If anything it's just that I was made to realise in Port Said what a stupid little fool I've been.'

I frowned, then tried to smile. 'Do you mind telling me what you're talking about?'

'I believe you're quite well aware of what I am saying,' she replied. With a deep sigh, she turned and walked away from me, and remained beyond my reach for the rest of the trek.

As we approached the work-site at the shattered canal, I saw a subtle and yet evident change in De Lesseps. He appeared revitalised as we crossed the desert. He rode his horse early in the morning and often galloped ahead of the small caravan during the day. Though I could not believe it, he took time for a short hunting trip and we watched as he killed a wild boar with a curved hunting knife lashed to a staff.

We stared in horror and apprehension as he faced the savage creature, an animal I believe as wild and recklessly courageous as any denizen of the desert. Its tusks glittered in the sun, as poisonous as the bite of an asp. It darted, grunted, slashed, leaped, and in the end fell dead with the Vicomte's knife driven into its heart.

De Lesseps turned his back on his foe, renewed, sweated and triumphant. 'Said Pasha and I used to hunt wild boars,' he said to no one in particular. 'When I was young of course. There is no challenge like the challenge of the boar. He never runs away. Cornered, he will slash out with those poisonous tusks as long as there is breath in his body. He has courage above all other animals. I've seen cowardly lions, but never a cowardly boar. You have to respect him as an opponent, and he must die cleanly. That is your obligation to him.'

When we came into the work camp at Ismailia we saw the fires from the huge vats where water was being boiled, cooled, and twice boiled again. We heard the throb and pound from the single dredge, and De Lesseps spoke in that vibrant tone I'd come to recognise as the arrogant, god-like, obstinate and unconquerable voice of the obsessed, inflexible and pompous trumpeter. I kept reminding myself that I had heard Louis Napoleon deny him, and yet he remained like the cornered boar he had slain, indomitable, unable to quit because he didn't know how to quit; he knew only how to fight, lashing out madly, until someone finally

put the quietus on him, and silenced him forever.

'I'll dig this ditch,' he said. 'They've not stopped me yet. They haven't stopped me. I'll dig it if I have to chew out the earth from here to Suez with that single dredge.'

The people in our company cheered him, but cynically I wondered if they paid homage because they believed him any more, or because with De Lesseps they knew which side their bread was buttered. He tolerated no opposition, at least not for very long; criticism was disloyalty, argument was treason. He was a benign father who brooked no affront to his incredible pride.

Seeing him stride about the compound, one could almost believe he would complete the project with his bare fists if he were forced to that. One watched the workers, in lines like ants, or like the ancient slaves at the Pyramids, with their baskets of earth, their donkeys, sway-backed under the weight of their panniers, the diggers, the pick and axe men, all working as though Louis Napoleon had not turned his back on this whole enterprise. Louis Napoleon? Who was he? There were only two gods out here, Allah and De Lesseps. They prayed to Allah, but they worshipped the bold, exalted presence of the Vicomte.

'My God,' I said aloud, standing alone near the raw-cut ravine where men struggled, chopped and loaded earth. 'Will he really do it, even now?'

As if the gods themselves deigned to answer me, a sudden, deafening explosion ripped from the bowels of the earth. I was thrown to my knees and felt the earth quake and tremble under me. I saw flying rocks, stones and debris and I flung myself face down, kissing the ground and trying to hide under my frail toppee. In my first insensate reaction I told myself I had seen bodies thrown about like sticks, twisted and tossed into the dust and flying crag, crystal, cartilage, lumber, iron, steel and nails. But I could not believe the hideousness of that nightmare and I tried to put it from my mind as I cringed there, seeking refuge behind a pebble.

As the rumbling echoes of the explosion softened and abated, the dust settled slowly. Screaming men ran in every direction, driven and impelled only by mass confusion. Men

in the pits ran up the inclines, clawing and grasping their way upward. Men on the ground above ran down into the excavations to save what they could or to rescue their fellows from cave-ins and avalanches and flooding. And over everything hung the tension. Every man waited for the next explosion, ready to leap for safety if such a condition remained in this doomed place.

The explosion ripped the dams open and furious waters washed in great cold waves and tumbling cataracts into the raw-cut ravines. Wailing, men trapped in these canyons crouched in sheltered leas, only to be mercilessly overwhelmed and drowned, thrown along like jetsam in the fearful flooding.

As is proven in every catastrophe, men forgot their fears, put aside their own safety, and plunged in to work against the ruthless storm that broke under a serene and cloudless desert sky. But even the bravest and most selfless men kept anxious eyes on the pits and mounds around them, awaiting another eruption.

For a long, stunned time I remained lying prostrate in the thick, smothering dust. I felt what seemed to be a hail of stones falling about my head and feet. When the thundering roar boomed away into echo and died, the silence which followed was fearful by contrast.

As the paralysing horror relaxed its stunning grip on me, I fought for breath in the hot, heavy-settling dust pall like a suffocating man.

I heard De Lesseps, Linant, Mougel and Ducelle yelling as they ran from the office building toward the diggings. I clambered to my feet. The first thing I saw was the showering of small rocks which the explosion had thrown all over the camp.

I saw Ducelle yelling at Oriana, ordering her to stay back, but she ran beside him, heedless, toward the pits.

I ran to join them, still half in shock and still powdered with dust. Everyone was yelling at everyone else, trying to make sense of a mindless event. What had happened? Who had seen what? How had the explosion been detonated? Voices stiffened and hardened with suspicion. Destruction by dynamiting had been suspected even in that storm and

fire which had first swept through the area. Now, there could be no doubt of human malevolence.

De Lesseps stood on a promontory, a blur against the sun, a towering monolith of rage. One could see in his face, as well as his fury at finding evidence of human intervention, human opposition, human betrayal, the flaring of an Olympian contempt for puny beings who dared obstruct his magnificent vision, destroy his hard-earned accomplishments, deny his achievement, stand in his way. How dare lowly, ordinary and common men – of whatever rank and status and political persuasion – attempt to stop him, when the gods themselves were powerless to deter him?

He halted and questioned every man who might have any information, no matter how slight, to offer. From accounts of eyewitness workers it became clear that a labourer, working with a pick axe on the incline of one of the ravines, had chopped into a concealed explosive, detonating it. There was no act of God here, no supernatural power at work, this was man-made disaster. And it seemed to me, on top of everything else, it spelled final doom for De Lesseps' ditch across the desert.

'Sabotage,' De Lesseps said, his mouth twisting, his eyes swirling with shadows.

'Who would do such a thing?' Linant said. 'Who would be so stupid?'

'I'm sure the saboteurs see it as the *coup de grâce*,' De Lesseps said in contempt.

'But such stupidity,' Linant insisted.

'Sometimes, my dear Linant, stupidity is a nationalistic trait. It affects the highest echelons of the military and the foreign offices. That stupidity of little-minded men who do not see beyond their own immediate interests. Who find in answer to complex issues, simplistic retaliation or attack by physical force. The ultimate in high-level stupidity.'

Oriana spoke then, her voice quavering. 'I believe one thing. I believe if we could recover any trace of those explosives, we'd find they came from Britain, or were bought with British money.'

*Part Two*

# ALEXANDRIA, 1854

# V

I FIRST MET Ferdinand Marie De Lesseps in person when I was invited to his hotel on my second day in Alexandria. I had been dispatched post-haste to Egypt when word came that Said Pasha had succeeded his uncle, Abbas Pasha, as viceroy and had returned to Egypt from his investiture ceremonies before the Sultan in Constantinople and – most importantly to me – that Ferdinand De Lesseps had come suddenly out of bucolic retirement at *Le Chenaie* and had turned up in Alexandria aboard the *Messageries* packet *Le Lycurgue* on the morning of November 7, 1854. I travelled lightly, taking along only my two pit bulls and a thick dossier on De Lesseps, and I arrived in Alexandria a few days later.

I read the investigative report on the Vicomte De Lesseps on my long sea voyage south – a matter of some ten days. After reading this chronicle prepared by secret sleuths for the foreign office, I felt I knew De Lesseps better than I knew my own father, or any of my brothers or even my little sister Janine. I came to call this document 'the sordid dossier'. Not that De Lesseps' life had been in the least sordid. Far from it. He had been incredibly active physically, politically, humanely, intellectually, as well as sexually. It was just that this file on him brimmed full with extraordinary details, many salacious, and our operatives seemed to have clawed and ferreted out his deepest secrets.

These men seemed determined to leave De Lesseps vulnerable to blackmail, if this became politically expedient. This angered me, and I didn't even yet know the gentleman. But I had come to realise during my years of reading these reports that all investigators are of the same mentality and all are guilty of digging overzealously into a subject's past.

This was true, from the district bobby sent out to collect certain evidence, no matter where the truth may lie, to the highest ranking officials. An entrenched ranking official called in his operatives and told them what his objective was, what he hoped to prove against the subject. Though these investigators – in law and foreign affairs – were sworn officers of the court, as well as inquirers, they never set out to collect and present cold facts which might aid those in charge to reach an honest conclusion. They set out with that one predetermined goal and they accomplished it, no matter the cost to truth, the ends of justice, or to their victim – as their subjects certainly became. But there was a clear reason for such behaviour, if they brought in the truth, they'd soon be sent packing, if they produced what was wanted, worked within the system, they would be praised and promoted. It truly didn't make me very proud of the establishment even when I weighed all the motives and logic.

The idea for a canal across the Isthmus of Suez did not originate in De Lesseps' mind. Court astrologers in the time of Pharoah Necho foretold of the cutting of a waterway across that desert. Realisation of their prophecy was tested during the reigns of the Persian Emperor Darius and later the Roman Consul Trajan when his soldiers occupied Egypt. But it was not until late in the 18th century that the strategic value of sea access between the Mediterranean and Red Sea was recognised by world powers. Napoleon Bonaparte saw that if he could control the route to India, the jewel of Great Britain's vast empire, he could slit his enemy's lifeline to the riches and exotic wares of the East.

In Napoleon's employ was a diplomat of royal birth. His name was Mathieu De Lesseps. In 1801, shortly after Napoleon's land forces found themselves stranded along the Nile and ignominiously evacuated, Napoleon appointed Mathieu De Lesseps as his consul to Egypt.

The elder De Lesseps was a resourceful man who was faced with an impossible task. Egypt lay under the hegemony of the Sultan of Turkey, also known as head of the Sublime Porte of Constantinople. With great prescience, Mathieu De Lesseps befriended an illiterate Albanian warrior, Mehemet Ali, who soon became the Viceroy of

Egypt and De Lesseps' lifelong friend. De Lesseps married well, a woman of Spanish blood whose niece, the Countess of Montijo, some years later gave birth to Eugenia de Guzman. In 1805, Ferdinand, a fourth son, was born to the De Lesseps. This was coincidentally the same year that Mehemet Ali became Viceroy of Egypt. Mathieu became the favourite among the Viceroy's unofficial advisers.

When Ferdinand became of age, he was sent to France to be educated, to be taught those requirements needed for successful public life. He excelled in school, he was athletic, scholarly, perceptive, tenacious and above all, charming. Charm he cultivated as he did languages, humanities, art, engineering. He was considered dashingly handsome and had a taste for women that remained with him to his deathbed.

His studies in political sciences completed, Fernando – as he was called by his peers – joined the diplomatic corps as an aide to his father, sent by the Bourbon government to Tunis where he had been serving as consul-general.

In Tunis, Fernando befriended a young Turkish officer, Yusuf, and with him, plunged into the sybaritic life of a casual young alien in a Mid-East nation. Together they tasted the fleshpots of the city until they both violated the strict seraglio laws of the state. They were caught *in flagrante delicto* in the harem of the Bey of Tunis, the ruler of the country.

Pursued and captured by the Bey's soldiery, only Mathieu De Lesseps' intervention saved them from the horrors of a Tunisian dungeon.

Chafing under the constraints of diplomatic conduct and jaded by the pleasures provided by the squalid brothels which peppered the dingy streets of Tunis' casbah, Fernando wanted only to escape the restrictive existence.

In 1832, with his father's approval, Yusuf and Ferdinand joined with French forces which were seeking to subdue and annex Algeria. While on a desert patrol, Yusuf was killed in a skirmish.

A few weeks after Fernando's return to Tunis, his father suddenly passed away. The Bourbon government in Paris, conscious of the ties that the De Lesseps family maintained

with Mehemet Ali, appointed the late minister's son as vice-consul to Alexandria.

Ferdinand sailed from Tunis aboard the ship *Diogenes*. This proved to be a fateful voyage. There was an outbreak of cholera on board the ship and the young vice-consul worked unceasingly among the sick. After thirty-six hours without sleep, he found himself too tired to sleep, and he lay, prey to a persistent memory that made little sense to him at the time. He kept recalling his father's tales of the Napoleonic dream – a canal that would link the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. By the time he reached Alexandria, that vision had etched itself in his mind and it became an abiding passion for Ferdinand and finally – an obsession.

The fierce Mehemet Ali greeted his old friend's son warmly. A cruel and cunning ruler – rated as certifiably insane by British intelligence – the father of eighty-four children, none of whom he knew by name, he had been forcefully and unhappily impressed by his eldest offspring. The behaviour of Prince Said was the scandal of the Islamic nation.

Failing to find any trace of the profligate scapegrace who stayed out of a Tunis dungeon only by the grace of God, Mehemet Ali became convinced that Ferdinand was the calming influence Prince Said so urgently needed.

Ferdinand soon became an intimate of the Viceroy's family and Mehemet Ali, instinctively trusting the young and dashing diplomat who knew how to charm the birds off the tree, was pleased and gratified at the way Ferdinand had taken Prince Said under his wing.

Said's ways were decadent, self-indulgent in a family noted for its inner discipline. Soon Ferdinand and Said were the closest of friends. Said loved him even above his own brothers. The Prince was a hedonist. He and Fernando became lovers for a while, but Said quickly became bored with anyone and they drifted into Platonic friendship again.

Under Ferdinand's influence, Said matured. His manic and depressive outbursts became less emotional and less frequent, though he continued to suffer paralysing headaches.

In Alexandria and Cairo, women were readily available to Ferdinand and he availed himself of their exotic ministrations prodigiously. Mehemet Ali was amazed by the young Frenchman's sexual prowess and appetites. And he was wildly entertained by tales of Ferdinand's exploits. He swore that Fernando was more Egyptian than European. The Viceroy was also deeply grateful for all Ferdinand had done for his son, and gratified by Said's progress. He rewarded the youthful diplomat with his own separate chamber within his palace and supplied him with three of his own concubines. 'A starter set,' De Lesseps called his harem.

In the plush surroundings of the mirrored boudoir, Fernando took his pleasure with each of the concubines in turn. Unknown to him, he was being observed by the gleeful Viceroy through secret peepholes.

In 1834, Egypt was struck by a plague. Within days one-third of Cairo and Alexandria inhabitants died. The whole land was an infected pesthole. Instead of fleeing the country as other Europeans did, Ferdinand remained. He shepherded victims into lazarettos. He turned the French consulate into a temporary hospital.

His actions were so courageous, so far beyond any call of duty, that the French government awarded him the Legion of Honour. He was even honoured by Egypt's rival British colony. At 29, Ferdinand De Lesseps had reached the pinnacle of his diplomatic career.

He was recalled from Egypt for successive European posts and in 1842, at the age of 37, Ferdinand was appointed consul to Barcelona. His life appeared complete, his happiness and success a matter of public record. Agathe, his wife of eight years, had borne him four children. And yet he remained haunted by a dream that would not let him rest, and from which he could not escape. He looked upon his accomplishments and all of his honours as nothing more than a beginning, though most men were proud to accomplish far less in a lifetime.

He remained restless. Agathe's mother came to live with the family at the consulate in Barcelona. Madame Delamalle was several years older than her son-in-law, but she found herself irresistibly attracted to him.

Madame Delamalle was a woman of great sensuality and worldliness. She had lost none of her appetites for sex in widowhood. One evening when Agathe and the children were visiting relatives in Seville, Madame Delamalle frankly told Fernando of her unquenchable attraction to him. Flattered, Fernando wasted no time jumping naked into her bed, thinking to have another evening's brief and quickly forgotten pleasure. His liaison with his wife's mother lasted two years. Their torrid affair actually ended only because family circumstances made it impossible to continue.

Never quiet for very long, a driven man, Ferdinand found himself caught in disasters and adventures unknown to ordinary men. In 1848, while he was still in Barcelona, the Spanish insurgents and Carlists battled each other in the streets and alleys and gardens of the city.

As he had done in Egypt during the plague, Ferdinand remained at his post even after it was bombed by the warring forces. He was heroic in protecting nationals during the savage conflict. His honours and reputation grew.

When the Bourbon government was finally overthrown by Louis Napoleon III, Ferdinand found himself in high favour with the new administration. He was sent on a special mission to Rome. But it was in Rome where his fortunes were reversed and he was plunged to the lowest ebb in his career to that moment.

Italy was in the midst of a revolution in the course of which Pope Pius IX was deposed. The French were outraged. The French army reinstated Pius IX, but Ferdinand became the scapegoat. Catholic France could not forgive him. He was held responsible for the débâcle and was forced to resign his post.

His reputation in shambles, he returned to the family estate of *Le Chanaie,* outside Paris.

Despondent over his ill treatment and summary dismissal by the Napoleon regime and his disfavour among the French bourgeois who had formerly idolised him, Ferdinand went into retreat. On the surface, he appeared content with his enforced retirement at *Le Chenaie*. He seldom spoke of his old dreams for a canal in the Isthmus of Suez, even to his children who loved to share his contagious enthusiasm.

Though his need for excitement and public adulation would never truly die within his heart, he devoted himself to the life of a country squire.

One might have thought he'd surrendered his dream of his youth, but in 1852 he could bear it no longer and he wrote to his old friend, Ruyssenaers, the Dutch consul-general in Egypt. In part, the letter read, as translated in my voluminous dossier:

> I confess my scheme is still in the clouds, and I do not conceal from myself that, as long as I am the only person who believes it to be possible, that is tantamount to saying it is impossible. Therefore, I seek your cooperation. I am referring, of course, to the piercing of the Isthmus of Suez with a navigable canal.

All entreaties made on Ferdinand's behalf by Ruyssenaers were coldly rebuffed by Abbas Pasha. The venal Abbas Pasha, Mehemet Ali's nephew, had succeeded to the rule of Egypt upon Mehemet Ali's death in 1849.

Rejected, De Lesseps remained at *Le Chenaie*. Fate, however, had not finished with him. Tragedy struck when one of his three surviving children died of scarlet fever. De Lesseps was inconsolable, unable to remain very long in one place, or to concentrate on any one subject. A few weeks later, he sat by Agathe's bed and watched her die. Agonised because he saw at last his terrible loss – a beloved and supportive wife who had stood by him in spite of his obsessions, compulsions, occasional pecadilloes, and even his long liaison with her own mother. She died without forgiving him, because he refused to ask her forgiveness, and she felt she had nothing to forgive. She died as she had lived, loving him quietly and devotedly.

Ferdinand was bereft, a widower with two children to care for. Only the devoted succour of Madame Delamalle, his ever-present mother-in-law, sustained him and encouraged him to take up a new life. Old friends now, their relationship held a bittersweet flavour, the sexuality of past years replaced by an empathy, a close alliance and deep concern for each other's well-being.

At times, De Lesseps became convinced that life was over for him, that he was tossed aside unneeded and unwanted, cast adrift, shunted out of the mainstream of international life where he had been exalted, useful and productive. 'There are no second chances,' he told himself, 'and I may as well resign myself to that fact.'

In the summer of that tragic year of 1854, a postman arrived at *Le Chenaie* bearing a letter postmarked Alexandria. De Lesseps had been trimming a cluster of grape vines which had become entangled. He descended the ladder despondently, as he did most things required of him these days – he was beginning to move more slowly, his shoulders were rounded, there was less spring in his step. He accepted the letter, glanced at its face, then read it again. Realising it was from Ruyssenaers, he opened it, unconsciously holding his breath.

Ruyssenaers wrote that Abbas Pasha had died – perhaps violently the rumours persisted – and that Prince Said, Mehemet Ali's oldest son and De Lesseps' long time disciple, was the new Viceroy of Egypt.

De Lesseps strode about in widening circles in his garden. His stride lengthened, his shoulders straightened, his head came up, and that old fire burned abruptly again in his dark eyes. He felt himself laughing aloud and unreasonably, barely able to contain his optimism and new-found hope.

'Nothing will stop me now,' he said aloud to the goats, the horse chestnut trees and the gods cringing above fleecy sheep-tail clouds in the azure French sky. 'Nothing – no one – shall be permitted to stop me.'

Within that month, De Lesseps was bound for Egypt, intent upon using his close friendship with Prince Said as a springboard for his return to public life, and a long-delayed date with destiny.

Reading that dossier, I felt I had all the information I needed on De Lesseps, that I knew more really than I wanted to know. For example, I could have dispensed with the long, purple passages dealing with his intimate alliance with the Empress Eugenie over the years. And, after all, he was an avowed enemy of my government and I didn't need to admire him, even grudgingly . . . .

When I walked into his hotel salon for afternoon tea – no alcoholic beverages are served overtly in Islamic countries – I found the fabulous De Lesseps with distinguished guests including Monsieur S.W. Ruyssenaers, Consul-General for Holland, Clot Bey and Hafous Pasha, a brother of Said and the Minister of Marine.

De Lesseps clung to my arm and introduced them all as his closest and dearest personal friends and adding, 'I hope you will join our circle, Tony. I assure you, you will be most warmly welcomed.' He acted not as if he now owned Egypt, but as if he owned the world.

Naturally reserved, as we British are far famed to be, and somewhat ill-at-ease in this distinguished company, I suspected his display of friendliness. Either he wanted these men to believe us friendlily disposed toward each other, or he wanted to impress me with the quality of *his* friends. Whatever it was, I found myself retreating slightly, wary.

'We have all been invited to one of the Viceroy's villas, a league from Alexandria on the Mahmoudieh Canal tomorrow,' De Lesseps said. 'I thought it prudent for us to meet ahead of time. For one thing, since my arrival, I've entertained as many as possible of those who remained close to Said Pasha during his sad years under his hated uncle Abbas Pasha who used him cruelly, and who remain close to him since his accession. I have let them talk of his habits, any changes in his personality since those dear years when I knew him so intimately, of his tastes, his mental tendencies, of the attitudes and prejudices of those around him. I have found who is in favour with him and who in disfavour. All are matters it is well to be informed on beforehand when one is a guest of the Prince. Repeatedly, I have been assured that since Said's return from Constantinople, he has spoken warmly of me, and looks forward to my visit. They say he speaks often of his long friendship for me. But – not one word have I uttered on the subject of my canal project. I have mentioned it to no one, not even to my brother who is secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. I'd appreciate it if – on our first visit to the Mohammed Said after his investiture in Constantinople – that nothing be said of that canal project. Nothing. It is a subject which I myself shall

not broach until I am quite sure of my ground and the scheme is sufficiently matured for the intelligent and warm-hearted young Prince to adopt it as his own, rather than mine.'

'Most wise.' Hafous Pasha nodded, smiling admiringly.

'I concur.' Monsieur Ruyssenaers leaned forward in his wicker chair, holding his tea cup as if the vessel were a mug of schnapps. He sighed heavily. 'I must warn you, old friend. I overheard Said Pasha remark – before he came to power – that if ever he became viceroy of Egypt, he should follow the example of his father who declined to have anything to do with cutting a canal across the Isthmus because of the difficulties it might lead to with England.'

Ruyssenaers smiled toward me and I nodded without speaking. But when I glanced up, I found De Lesseps regarding me with a faint, ironic smile – as if he and I shared some negating secret.

'This is not an encouraging precedent,' De Lesseps said. 'But of course, I am confident of success.'

'Of course,' said Hafous Pasha, Ruyssenaers and Clot Bey, all in order, like magpies obeying a signal.

As the others were leaving, De Lesseps signalled me to remain. He drew me aside, almost in the furtive, confidential manner of one who wants to borrow ten guineas.

He found us wing-backed, fan-shaped wicker chairs under veranda palms. He ordered tea with ice in it which put him on my enemy list at the outset. He said, 'My dear boy, I've looked forward to meeting you.'

I thought he lied. I would have sworn he'd never given me a thought until this moment, and even now that I wavered only vaguely and tentatively at the fringes of his consciousness. His mind, I felt, was totally preoccupied with itself and its grandiose schemes.

'Why?' I said.

He looked up and almost permitted a smile. 'We have a lot of work to do here,' he said. 'It may well occupy the rest of our lives.' I doubted this, since I had no intention of spending the rest of my days in a land where one drank tea with ice in it and drenched one's shirt with sweat every five

minutes. He nodded emphatically. 'Since I am no longer a representative of the French government, I consider myself a citizen of the world, with concern, if not a passport, for all nations. The work I am concerned with will profit you, your nation, all nations – beyond belief – if we can only make them see that.'

'You say *we*. I must remind you, M'sieu, I *am* a representative of Her Majesty's government.'

'Of course you are. And in a God-sent position to serve her and your nation as few men in history have been permitted.' He sighed expansively, a man in his late forties who looked to be – with no exaggeration – in his middle thirties. I had to remind myself that his son Charles was almost my age. There was ruddy, solid youthfulness and vigour about him, and he added to it by saying earnestly, 'We young men must work together. Our enemies are those men who are old in their minds, no matter their years. You and I must stand against such obstructionists.'

'Oh?' I said. 'Must we?'

'The scheme in question of course is that of cutting that canal through the Isthmus of Suez.'

'My government objects.' I did not add that I was here as representative of Her Majesty's government, as nearly a spy as one could be with title of consular attaché, to observe, report on, and even to oppose, his every effort toward realisation of his fantastic, impractical and inimical – to English interests – programme.

He seemed not even to hear my objection. 'The very idea of a canal the seventy kilometres – or I think you call it the geographical eighty-eight miles between the Gulf of Suez and Port Said on the Mediterranean has been contemplated – and objected to – since the earliest recorded historical times. It has forever been considered impractical.'

'One of my government's objections.'

He smiled. 'Geographical dictionaries inform us indeed that the project would have been long ago executed but for those oft repeated insurmountable obstacles.'

'Don't those same obstacles remain insurmountable?'

'My dear boy! To modern scientific minds? To people who think above their hips? I don't believe there are any

insurmountable obstacles. And I know that a brilliant young mind like yours – '

'I have but one view, M'sieu. My government's – unalterable opposition.'

He gave me that odd, conspiratorial smile. 'Yes. I'm sure that is your official British position.'

'It certainly is.' Could I have said it any clearer than that?

He nodded. 'But I have learned much about you. That is why I have looked forward so eagerly to meeting you. I had a letter – from the Empress Eugenie herself. She is most generous in her praises of you. She remembers you warmly from when she was Comtessa de Teba. She says you are the one I must cultivate, because you represent youthful England – the progressive England championed by Disraeli.' I didn't bother telling him that I represented Lord Derby and not Disraeli and his Tories who were called 'Young England.' I simply shrugged. He continued with enthusiasm. 'Because, Eugenie says your mind is young, open, liberal, progressive – able to share a vision – '

'M'sieu,' I said in frustration. 'I assure you. My party is liberal – in name at least. But the idea of a French canal in North Africa remains simply untenable to Her Majesty's government.'

But he only nodded again. He understood, said his faint smile. Officially, there was nothing I could say. But clearly, he was convinced that I already shared his views – all of them, or those in which I could not yet concur from lack of familiarity, I would receive with that open mind with which the Empress Eugenie had invested in me from her long ago memories of me. To him, I was an old and intimate friend of the Comtessa de Teba. Ergo, I was a fellow believer, a conspirator even. He believed that, accepted it. In his inflexible mind, my own mind was open – to him and his most fantastic visions.

'I tell you this, my young friend. For the past eight years, I have studied incessantly, under all its aspects, the question of a canal across the Suez. In fact, such a navigable waterway was already in my mind when I first came to Egypt twenty years ago.'

He nodded, staring across the sun-struck plaza. 'In 1849,

when I was serving as Envoy Extraordinary to Rome and was recalled abruptly and without sufficient or reasonable explanation – except a sudden change in government policy – I asked for and received leave from my office as Minister Plenipotentiary.

'Since that time, I have occupied myself with agriculture and with building a model farm on property recently acquired at *Le Chenaie* by my mother-in-law, Madame Delamalle. And always with this – this obsession in my mind – this linking Suez and Port Said via that magnificent ditch.

'As you know, when the gentle and beneficent Mehemet Ali died – '

'Again our beliefs are at variance, M'sieu. We British believe from direct evidence that Mehemet Ali was a savage, as inhuman and cruel as the Sultan he opposed. And certifiably insane, I have heard.'

That condescending smile. I could be forgiven my ignorance. He would teach me. 'It is easy to despise a stranger. I *knew* Mehemet Ali. He was a good man. As good as his enemies – and his foreign rulers and allies – would permit. You may believe that. In fact, during the plague of 1833, the Mehemet Ali turned his seraglio into a hospital, open with the best treatment he could gather to the commonest people of his country.'

I had heard that De Lesseps had saved the life of Said Pasha, Mehemet Ali's son, during that plague. I waited, expecting De Lesseps to launch into an account of his own heroism, but he surprised me and said nothing more on the subject. By now, I was convinced he endured only two topics of conversation in his august presence, himself and his own interests – which of course included the promotion and execution of the Suez canal project.

I found him from that first afternoon in his presence, a pompous, vain and pretentious man who could toss off phrases like 'for the ultimate good of mankind' in ordinary conversation. He spoke in that manner – not only in political speeches where such clichés merely made one nauseous, but in everyday casual exchanges. 'It is for the glory of France, for the profit of the community of nations,'

he would say, perfectly sincerely – and with a straight face.

I finally even ceased looking for the twinkle in his eyes that would brand it all a great joke. There was no twinkle. There was no joke. He was deadly serious.

# VI

I CERTAINLY entertain no intention to see – nor would I permit – the incredible achievement of a waterway across nubian wastes reduced to a gossipy tract by a nineteenth century Pepys, a sensational scandal mongering, or name-dropping – Disraeli, Louis-Napoleon, Empress Eugenie – or a confession even on an international scale. It is simply that aspects of all these demeaning revelations infect this treatise, reaching into the highest places and touching and even damaging the most heroic celebrities. Some of those giant figures proved to be meaner than life up close. I can't help that. I was there; I saw what I saw; I recorded it as honestly as I could with my preset personality, my inward awareness developed since childhood. I finally determined to tell what I saw – and much which was retailed to me second hand – as it appeared reflected by *my* retina upon the prefabricated conceptual screen of my own mind. It's all I can do, I see. I shall attempt nothing less, nothing more.

It was De Lesseps himself who brought Eugenie back into my mind and heart – that bastion from which she had not stirred since the first time I saw her; reclining there, calmly and stubbornly and tauntingly, despite my efforts to uproot her, drive or drink her out, so that it broke my heart all over again to hear her name spoken in the bright sunlight of faraway Alexandria. She was as near as the sudden hurt in my chest.

I'd lived an unruffled existence for about twenty years before that afternoon in Belgravia when I encountered the Comtessa de Teba – Eugenia Marie De Montijo De Guzman – in the drawing room of a Mrs Moorheath.

Something happened to me in that instant, something which altered my life, my outlook and my inner sense of

well-being and identity. And by the time twelve years later when I first met De Lesseps in Egypt, I'd not recovered at all from Eugenie's devastating effect upon me. The sound of her name was still a cruel, rasping cut deep inside me.

I make no false claim that my loving Eugenie set me very far apart from that herd of stags, old and young, famous and infamous, rich and poor, noble and knave, from Madrid, London to Paris, who found themselves captured and enraptured, cruelly enchanted, under her spell. Only because what took place between the Spanish beauty and me has relevance in this report on the building of the Suez canal do I recall it, under duress, even now.

You have long been regaled with ecstatic reports of Eugenie's incredible beauty, her rich golden hair and violet dark eyes from Scottish-American forebears, her proudly held head, the ceramic-glaze flesh of throat, shoulders and arms – and all this carefully cultured beauty set-off and enhanced in fabulously fashionable couture. To Eugenie belonged the newest of the new because Eugenie was the most daring, the most ambitious, the most determined and driven woman of her time.

Believe me, she was even lovelier than you've been told because words themselves become impotent tools, dulled around the edges, when etching a beauty so extraordinarily vivid, alive and lively, blazing out with a brilliant mind, an overwhelming personality and appetites, and a genuine and disarming love of laughter.

If gossips whisper she had a hundred lovers, I would believe the rumour, because every man who looked at her wanted her, desperately and at once, no matter how helplessly, no matter from how far.

One of the sons of Lord Stratford – I'd known Alec up at Oxford after Sandhurst gave up on me – invited me to this afternoon soirée in the salon at Mrs Moorheath's home. This *grande-dame*, fat-bellied and fat-jowled, bejewelled and powdered, collected handsome young aristocrats like Alec. She welcomed me warmly on sight, but cooled just faintly upon learning my father was in the British consular service and that I would likely follow him there.

I was free to graze unfettered. But I didn't wander far. I

saw Eugenie – and of course I had no idea who she was – dancing, being cut in upon every two steps, her lovely head back, her eyes laughing.

I stood at the brink of the polished floor, across which a trio played the popular dance tunes of the year, and stared openly. Once – I swear it was not my imagination – in turning, her lovely violet blue eyes struck against mine, and for an instant held.

It took a long time, and much manoeuvering. I found no one who could present me to her – Alec didn't even know her. Finally, I simply walked up to her when she was alone for a moment. I thought she might cut me dead. One *had* to be presented in these places where gathered nobles, celebrities and cosmopolites. But to my surprise she laughed up at me and said, 'You've been staring.'

I laughed, too. 'Doesn't everyone? And anyway, no one noticed *me*. Not with you in this *salon* . . . My God, you're the loveliest thing I've ever seen.'

She laughed. 'You're pretty yourself.'

'Yes. Aren't I?' Anything to keep her laughing, the glow illumining her until her beauty was hurting to behold and too bewitching to escape. 'A matched set . . . We'd go well together.'

'You make up your mind in a hurry, don't you?'

'That's because it's wholly uncluttered. It's open – to you.'

She shook her head, still smiling. 'Wouldn't it be nice if things were so easy?'

'They are. Oh, they are. If only you'll let them be. God meant life to be simple. People confuse issues . . . My mind is quite clear on the matter. From this moment I need never look at another woman as long as I live, if you would have it.'

'Just like that?'

'Oh, but it isn't just like that. Like mental illness, this isn't something that happened in this flash of time – love at first sight. Nothing so mundane. It's been coming on for a long time. All these years. My sainted mother worried about me. No passionate interest in any woman. Oh, I could tell. She was beginning to question deep in her mind where such

thoughts are hidden and censored – she was beginning to wonder if her son had developed limp wrists and dreamed about Chauncey and Reggie . . . Well, I can reassure her now. She can relax, dear soul. I find I'm desperately normal. I just know now – at last – what I've been waiting for all these years. How happy she'll be when I tell her your name.'

She laughed again. 'You've settled it all so nicely, haven't you?'

I nodded, laughing. 'Oh, no loose ends at all. Not as far as I'm concerned. Now, I'll devote all my energies, all my thoughts, all my heart to making you see it my way.'

'I'm afraid that won't be so easy, my intriguing young friend.'

'I never ask that anything be easy – '

' – Not possible.'

'Not possible? You and I? What was God thinking to make two people like us unless he meant us for the other? Why not?'

She laughed at me. 'You'd have to ask my mother about that, I'm afraid.'

'I shall.' I pretended to search the crowded rooms. 'I shall. Who is she?'

'The Comtessa de Montijo.' Her tongue in her cheek, she stared up at me, still smiling warmly. 'Don't you know who I am?'

'Yes. The loveliest – '

'I am the Comtessa de Teba – '

'I won't hold that against you. We'll work around it some way. I'm afraid I have no title to offer you, unfortunately. But then, you have your own, don't you? Anyhow, give me a chance – and I'll bring the world for you to wear on a diadem.'

'Why that's a lovely offer. But I'm afraid not . . . If you knew who I was – you'd also know why I'm here.'

'You're here because God wanted us to meet – '

She stopped smiling abruptly and inclined her head slightly, without really moving it at all. Any actual movement was in her expressive eyes. There was indication of direction, there was identification of a certain man – and to this day I swear it of Eugenie who feared no one, just the glint of terror in their depths.

The man watching us – the whole room watched us, but only he mattered, only he had substance, menace, malice, only he could kill the smiling in that lovely face – looked at first sight like a fat little Corsican opera-tenor, stout belly, clutched and vested in, round face, full throat and all. His olive complexion was underflushed with stria of virulent red at the moment; his moustache twitched, and his beard bristled. Since then, I've read historians who marked him at five feet six inches – no, nearer five feet three – in built-up French heels on dully gleaming continental boots. His small eyes glittered and narrowed in pockets of suet as he stared malevolently at us.

'Goodbye,' she whispered. 'I must go.'

'Who is that ugly little man glowering at us?'

She frowned faintly. 'Don't pretend you don't know.'

'I don't know.'

'That's Louis-Napoleon, *senor*. The late Emperor's own son.'

'Oh,' I said. 'The Bonaparte Pretender.'

But she was gone, hurrying to his side, seeming to glide, her feet not even touching the floor.

Alec gave me hell over drinks later. 'Are you trying to start an international incident?'

I grinned at him, bemused. 'If I must,' I said.

He told me that the Bonaparte Pretender – Louis-Napoleon – was living in London after the failure of his second *coup*. Rather than having him shot, Emperor Louis-Philippe had ordered him imprisoned.

Meanwhile, during his exile, Louis-Napoleon had met Eugenie. Since that time she had been either his fiancée or his mistress, depending on who retailed the gossip. She was his property, and he now visited her covertly in London where she lived with her mother.

I must admit, I did not take either Alec nor the future President of the French Republic very seriously. I believed that if God had any plan at all for this miserable world in which we lived, it was that Eugenie should be mine.

I saw her again, far more quickly than I even dared hope, In fact, I had small expectations of ever seeing her again – except at a distance. I received an invitation to tea at

the home of Mrs Moorheath. This was a shock because I knew that this great lady was far less than impressed with me.

Eugenie and her mother were there. Eugenie bowed her head faintly and gave me an odd little smile. Her mother, still lovely and full breasted, ignored me as if I did not exist. I looked about for Louis-Napoleon, but his eminence was not present.

I had no chance for even the briefest conversation with Eugenie. I felt empty, depleted, defeated. People were already departing before her lovely little hand touched my arm and she smiled up at me. 'It's good to see you again,' she said.

'It hurts,' I said honestly. 'Even from across the room.'

'Still. That's all that can be, isn't it?'

I caught my breath. '*You* invited me here.'

She smiled. 'Let's say I wished aloud for it – and it happened.'

'Oh my God! How good of you.'

'Yes. Wasn't it? I had to see you. I had to tell you, you must not attempt to see me, ever again. Louis-Napoleon despises you. He says you're too pretty to be much of a man.'

'And how do you feel about that?'

She shrugged, but smiled, with that hand still lightly upon my arm. 'Male beauty does not excite me that much,' she said. 'Beautiful people are such spoiled bores, don't you think?'

'Oh, definitely. Present company excepted, of course.'

'No.' She shook her head and stopped smiling. 'No. I am spoiled. I know what I want in this world. And I think I know that you are spoiled, too. Mother and sisters who loved you and spoiled you. You with that devilish grin. Those gray eyes. And that smile that says all women adore you.'

'My eyes, my smile – they say that? Really?'

'You know what they say.'

'I know my smile hasn't done much for me – with you.'

'I am sorry about that, *mon cher.* It is the *accomplishment* of a man that attracts me, turns my head,

makes me swoon. A conqueror rouses all the instincts inside me.'

'Is that the appeal of Louis-Napoleon?'

'Don't be a British snob – '

'I can't help it. I *am* a British snob.'

'What Louis-Napoleon accomplishes may be yet ahead of him . . . Still, he has *attempted* so much. He shall achieve every dream. It is there in him for one to see if one looks closely . . . And I see it.'

'How nice for him. I see nothing of the kind.'

She exhaled sharply. 'And I must ask – if we do meet – by accident – you must not be attentive to me. Never. Louis-Napoleon is very jealous.'

'He has much to feel inferior about.'

'Not to me.'

'Do you belong to him?'

'Mama wants me to.'

'And you?'

'We can't talk about it. Not here like this. Come to visit me. At three tomorrow. One visit. No one will be there but Mama and you and me. You will see how impossible it all is.'

'Nothing is impossible.'

'How young you are! How sweet! Still, we must not anger Louis-Napoleon for the sake of a silly flirtation. I won't, and you must not. After all, what are we? Louis-Napoleon may be the new Emperor of France.'

'France dreams of becoming a republic,' I reminded her.

'A mere detail,' she said.

I was on the street where she lived the next afternoon at two-thirty. I presented myself at her door promptly at three. I was admitted by a liveried butler and shown into a sunny afternoon reception room where Eugenie sat sedately with her lovely mother. Thank God, there were no other guests. I knew by the chilled look on the Countess de Montijo's face that I was a doomed man, being bidden farewell.

Eugenie's mother talked of how well they'd been received in London this visit, and yet how boring it all was for her. One saw she was less than pleased with the way things

developed between her daughter and the future President of France. She said the élite of London were hopelessly Victorian, deadly boring. I could only agree with her about this. She thought she and Eugenie should be leaving for Paris soon. This left me speechless.

Finally, her mother departed, and Eugenie and I were alone. She talked about herself. Like all people of strong personality, she was her own favourite topic. 'I was born during an earthquake,' she said. 'And when my mother carried me, a gypsy told her that I should live to be a hundred and become a queen.'

'I'll have to take over a kingdom,' I said. 'Maybe a small principality somewhere. I'll think of something.'

She gazed at me a moment, smiled, and then stopped smiling.

'Don't you know?' she said.

'Don't I know what?'

'That I am going to marry Louis-Napoleon.'

'No. I only knew that you were going to live to be a hundred.'

'You refuse to take him seriously, don't you?'

'Oh, Eugenie. Come on. There are many bores in this world, many empty-headed nobles. But don't tell me you take this Louis-Napoleon seriously.'

'I do,' she said. 'I have. Since the first time I saw him. I knew then I would be his wife. And most importantly, Mama knew it. She has directed me toward that moment in everything she has done.'

'Does Louis-Napoleon have anything to say about it?'

'Louis-Napoleon wants me,' she said in quiet self-assurance that was devastating. 'That's why I asked you here. You must not do anything to upset the – delicate balance.'

'You mean there is no way I can talk sense into you?'

'No way at all, my dearest. You're young. Handsome. You can have anyone you want.'

'No,' I said. 'If I can't have you, I want no one.'

'Every heartbroken swain has said that, love, since time began.'

'Only this one means it.'

'You want only to get into my boudoir. I'm sure of that.'

I winced, then forced a smile. 'If you believe that, I promise you, I shall do – accomplish – something, someday, someway – to get in your – boudoir.'

She laughed at me. 'I do hope so,' she said.

She allowed me to come back, after all. There was such a poignant sense of hopelessness about our affair that every moment was heightened, sharpened.

There was a kind of armed truce between Eugenie's mother and me. It wasn't that she disliked me. She was barely aware that I existed. I simply lacked credentials to enter her world. I didn't measure up. I could have been the most dashing bore on earth if only I'd possessed a title, and she would have acknowledged my existence, at least. But, as it was, if I conquered the world, I still wouldn't meet Mama's minimum qualifications. I wasn't what she wanted for her daughter. I must be fair and admit she never for one moment considered me eligible, or regarded me seriously. Like a summer cold, I was a slight nuisance, but I would pass.

I knew, too, that I would pass, and this lay heavily upon me. Eugenie said she liked to have me around because I made her laugh, and there was little laughter in Victorian London that year. But I felt heavy hearted and unhappy. I found little to smile about. Once in a while, she kissed me in a darkened cab. Once or twice she drew the back of my hand against the thrilling rise of her full, resilient, highstanding young breast. But, even so, she kept me at a distance. She knew how. She was born knowing all the feminine wiles and tricks.

It was a far from satisfactory summer, but at least I was near her. I could pray for miracles, and often did.

Eugenie sat with me in the visitors gallery at Parliament. It was at her suggestion. She had heard so much about the Jew Disraeli and she wanted to see him. She was fascinated. I saw that she had not lied. It *was* men of accomplishment which acted upon her like a powerful aphrodisiac. Her eyes sparkled and she sat forward on the edge of her bench, watching him.

We had chosen an excellent day to watch Disraeli perform. For some reason, obscure to me, Benjamin Disraeli was twitting the august body over British inertia in the middle east. 'Our interests lie there, gentlemen,' he said. 'Whether we go *forward* or *backward* in the community of powerful nations depends on our decisions for action or inaction there.'

'A pet subject of our Episcopalian Jew,' I whispered.

'I know.' She silenced me impatiently, leaning forward to watch him and to listen to him.

It was almost as if Disraeli knew Eugenie, Comtessa de Teba, sat in his audience. There were those who said he played to the gallery anyway, and to the reporters, or perhaps beyond, to the gods, in his declaiming. Disraeli overacted. He always had. But no one slept during one of his speeches. And if he were sensational when he had the floor, he truly stole all the scenes with his expressive face, cunning mannerisms and mocking, fleering smiles, while others spoke. Often, he would delicately pick at the outer rims of his nares with bent pinky at the very instant a rival speaker attempted to nail down a salient point. How distracting it must have been to have one's climactic moment misplaced in smothered titters and exasperated sighs from gallery and opponents.

Disraeli talked for a long time. He hammered hard on the need for development and research on the matter of new and better routes to the middle east. This gave his opponents just the ammunition they needed to destroy him. They permitted their finest to attack and rip Disraeli apart. 'You are talking about a canal in the Isthmus of Suez, aren't you, sir?' the speaker inquired in heavy sarcasm. 'Although any schoolboy knows the impossibility of a Red Sea to Mediterranean canal because of the tides. As any school child knows – but our distinguished colleague chooses to overlook – the twenty-seven foot difference between mean tides in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean has forever precluded any idea of a feasible water link – and always shall.'

Disraeli blew his nose noisily and got to his feet. He spoke softly, saying only, 'May I inquire, sir, if you truly believe

modern science incapable of finding a solution to such an old and long-studied problem?'

When we left the building, Eugenie was breathless with excitement. 'He's right you know,' she cried, taking my hand.

'Is he? Who? About what?'

'Disraeli. Such an exciting man! He's right. There should be a canal across the Suez,' she said. She nodded emphatically. 'There will be.'

'A gypsy prophecy?'

'No. It must be. It shall be.'

I shook my head. 'Impossible. Impractical.'

'No. Not when men like Disraeli believe in it. It will be only a matter of time. I know it.'

Abruptly, soon after, Eugenie stopped seeing me. When I appeared at her door – and I did, often and desperately – I was turned away, politely, firmly, finally.

I could not forget her. She followed me when I walked the streets we had lazed along together. I saw her ahead, and it was never she. I heard her laughter in a crowd, but it was never her laughter, not true enough, not clear enough, not heartbreaking enough.

Then, suddenly I was invited to a small farewell party at her home. I arrived at eight to find fewer than twenty guests, all of them looking as gloomy as I. It was Mama's farewell party to London. She and Eugenie would spend some weeks at a spa, and then settle in Paris.

Louis-Napoleon arrived abruptly, and unannounced, at nine. I know the exact hour, because I know the exact circumstance. Eugenie had drawn me alone to a shadowed place in the foyer. She clung to my hands and I saw tears making her eyes misty violets. I wanted to clutch her close. I remained standing, stiff and miserable. 'I shall miss you, Tony,' she said. 'I shall never forget you.'

'My God,' I said. 'You make it sound so final.'

'It is final, my dearest one. What was never to be can persist no longer – even as a game.'

At that instant, a huge grandfather clock near us struck the hour, like the tolling of doomsday. The front door opened and the little fat man strode in – Louis Napoleon.

He looked as if he owned the house, as if he owned Eugenie, as if he owned the world.

He came directly to us. He stared at me – with that remembered malevolence – but did not bother to dignify my existence by so much as a nod.

I saw that the fat little bastard had caught Eugenie's fragile fingers in his hand and was bending them backward quietly, but fiercely. Her lovely face paled, but otherwise she betrayed nothing though the pain must have been intense.

I stepped towards him. I would have quietly and casually broken his fat nose in that moment, but something in Eugenie's eyes stopped me – pleading, warning, terror – that faint glint again. Well, at last she had what she and her Mama wanted for her, and I suppose everything in this world has its price.

I stared at her helplessly. I saw everything in her eyes except what I expected to see – loathing for the little lout.

That was the last time I saw Eugenie, except at a distance. I sound immodest to suggest it was I – and my pursuit of Eugenie – which nudged fate and history slightly. But within the week, all London newspapers carried the news: The President-Prince of the Second Republic of France had set the date for his royal marriage to Eugenie de Guzman, Comtessa de Teba.

Naturally enough, I was among those *not* invited to Eugenie's wedding to Louis-Napoleon in Paris, January 30, 1853.

I was certain that even if Eugenie had thought, or bothered, to add my name to the list of guests, it would not have passed the scrutiny of the least of Louis-Napoleon's social secretaries. It is not conceit to think he did not want me there; he didn't want me anywhere. He had seen the way Eugenie had laughed up into my face one night, and no matter how far either he or I travelled, neither of us would ever forget that moment. But by that chilled January day, I am sure Eugenie de Guzman had forgotten my name. She was caught up in the excitement of a new world and a new name and a new life. Her ambition had been realised. Her

mother's gypsy fortune had been in part fulfilled. Mother and daughter had what they wanted. Her mother had managed for her daughter the supreme marriage contract of the nineteenth century. I don't deceive myself that Eugenie ever wasted a moment's thought to our running, hand in hand, one afternoon in the rain, to a hack, only to find it occupied, and then standing there, laughing together in the downpour.

Oh, I was one of the faces in the wild celebration which made of Paris one glittering *fête*. Clouds snarled in black scalloped piles at the far rims of her world. Military bands played loudly at every corner. People ran, laughing and crying and embracing strangers, in the crowded rain-glistening streets.

I was outside at the Tuileries at noon when Eugenie and Louis-Napoleon appeared on a high balcony and waved, through artillery salutes and screaming of mobs swirling around me.

At that distance, she was achingly, vividly beautiful in white velvet gown, lace veil secured with white blossoms and a diamond tiara once worn by Josephine in wedding another Napoleon. Eugenie's stunted bridegroom-to-be, barely as tall as she – and she certainly in heelless slippers – was decked out in the uniform of a full general, with every possible decoration and ribbon of honour.

I stood against a yellowed wall as the long procession passed under dripping horse chestnut trees on its way to Notre Dame. Bands, cavalry, and brilliantly plumed regiments preceded their carriage. Then she came in the same coach which the earlier Napoleon, Louis' grandfather had used as transportation to a couple of *his* weddings. There were dozens of delays. Her carriage sat unmoving in the street directly in front of me. I stared at her over the heads of her adoring subjects, but she was slightly out of focus, dimmed as she was by my tears. The crowds shoved and thrust and screamed around the stalled vehicle. Banners fluttered from every flagstaff.

I could not get near Notre Dame where the Archbishop of Paris received the wedding couple after a delay of two hours from palace to church. I read later that 25,000 candles lit up

the interior of Notre Dame. The service droned on interminably, but it was an unforgettable spectacle, with hundreds of musicians under the frenzied, if uninspired direction of Daniel Auber himself.

I glimpsed her last when she left Notre Dame – Empress Eugenie now, though somehow God remained uncaring in heaven – and returned with her Emperor in procession to the Tuileries. She had him. Her ambition was realised. Someone offered me one of the commemorative medals which had been struck to memorialise the day. 'Souvenir. Souvenir, M'sieu! Of the happiest day in France's history.' The Emperor's head was engraved on one side, Eugenie's on the other, along with the date and occasion. I shook my head and wandered away numbly, looking for a drink.

I saw her no more. A year had passed. I no longer wanted to have her for my own. I knew better. I wanted something far less – far more impossible – I wanted only something that would rid me even of her memory, something that would cleanse me, and set me free.

And so Eugenie was my last thought that night in Alexandria after De Lesseps, in casual and unknowing cruelty, recalled her to my mind.

At last, I fell asleep. She was the first thing I saw when I woke up the next morning. I can't tell you why it made me feel sad to see her behind my eyes, as vivid as always. But just looking back at her remembered image filled me with the deepest kind of sadness and inexpressible longing. I hurt with that empty-bellied, yearning sort of melancholy that seeps down through you when you've lost someone immeasurably dear, or remember someone agonisingly intimate from a part of your life that's past and over and gone. I was swept by that feeling which brings to your mind all the paths you've loitered, the ships you've sailed, the music you've danced to, voices that grabbed you, but were not her voice, places and people you've seen and known and loved and will never see again, the dreams you've had, the successes you've craved, the worlds you never conquered and never will, the decent things you should have done and have left undone. That brings back the streets you've walked

alone at night, watching your solitary shadow bumping along the pavement ahead of you. The songs that bring her back, that force you to remember. Sights, smells, sounds. A whole world lost, a whole life wasted. And yet she was so real to me it was as if she were near enough to touch, beautiful to weep for still, and I wanted to reach out and touch her, but knew I had better not try it – for the sake of my sanity, I'd better not try it. She wasn't going to be there. She wasn't ever going to be near again. She was gone and all that was left of her was the agony of recall that I could not escape, that I was doomed never to escape.

# VII

THE MORNING FOLLOWING my first meeting with De Lesseps in Alexandria, I was up at five. I opened the two tall windows of my room which were shaded by jacaranda trees in full bloom. The air was scented by these purple blossoms and by the jasmine lining the avenue leading to the canal. Beyond, I could glimpse Lake Mareotis, tossed in the false dawn by soft fresh breezes.

It was too beautiful a day to stay inside, or to wait for the continental breakfast which would be served in my room. I dressed and went out to the kennels where the throaty yelping of my pit bulls welcomed me as if I were Caesar. I chatted with them, patted them and then went for a run with them along the canal.

When I returned to the hotel, I was shocked to see De Lesseps' heroically bulky form poised on the edge of a wicker chair on the shadowed veranda. He leaped up and, calling my name, hurried to meet me, hands outstretched in Gallic fashion, at the steps.

My pit bulls went into a slavering frenzy. I don't exaggerate. They lunged against their leashes, snarling and growling as they tried to attack De Lesseps.

Luckily, startled, he retreated a couple of steps before they got him and by using all my strength, I managed to control the ravening dogs, bringing them to heel on each side of me.

'*Mon dieu*,' De Lesseps said, shaking his leonine head. 'They are vicious beasts, aren't they?'

I was as astonished and puzzled as he by their violent behaviour. I shook my head. 'They're usually well-behaved.'

'And dogs usually like me.'

I laughed. 'Well, obviously these two don't. They're trained to fight – in the pits – and to the death – but only against each other. These fellows have never fought anything in anger. They're docile as lambs, I swear it.'

'Of course they are. I'm sure it's all a mistake. I undoubtedly startled them by running towards you with my arms out.' And before I could warn him away, he knelt on the wide concrete steps and stretched out the back of his hand towards the pit bulls. 'They are ugly ogres, aren't they?' he began.

The bulls reacted again, lunging and snarling at him. My reactions were swift and I yanked them back, almost off their feet. 'Don't do that,' I said to De Lesseps. I pulled the dogs down the steps to the pavement. 'There's a scent about you. Something. I never saw them behave like this before . . . Let me get them back to their kennels and we'll have breakfast, if you'll be my guest.'

De Lesseps and I breakfasted on the veranda. The chef was kind enough to attempt to toast thin slices of the flat round loaf called *aiysh*, and with it served *mishmish* preserves. Arabic coffee is thick and black and ordered according to the amount of sugar required to make it palatable. I requested *ziyada*, which is sweet. De Lesseps laughed indulgently and ordered his coffee bitter. '*Saada*,' he said to the waiter. 'And,' he added, 'Ismailia melon – if it is of true maturity and excellent quality.' He smiled across the linen-covered table. 'A real treat if you haven't tried it.'

He continued to pick and fret at the way my dogs had attacked him on sight. Somehow one felt his honour had been impugned.

'Pit bulls are a strange breed,' I said. 'Docile as kittens, mostly. Yet there are records of their turning viciously on their masters, of attacking and slaying babies in cribs. Like all of us, I guess they're temperamental and opinionated.'

'Not a dog I'd like to have around me.'

I laughed. 'On the other hand, I'm not insanely fond of French poodles.'

'Who is?'

'Your dear friend the Empress Eugenie, for one. I tried

once to awaken her interest in my fat, ugly trolls, my pit bulls. She disliked them intensely.'

'They can make it difficult for one to care deeply for them.'

'No. Not if you know them.' I smiled, suddenly remembering that he had censured me for disliking Mehemet Ali – without knowing him. 'I grew up with dogs like these. I've found them unfailingly ugly until they're beautiful, loyal until one weeps at them. And tenacious. My God. It is, as a matter of fact, their tenacity which I prize and admire most in the world. One admits this tenacity is an acquired trait, perhaps. They've been trained to clamp something in their undershot jaws and to hold on until hell freezes. And that's what they do. To see that beautiful, unfailing tenacity and not admire and love them? Impossible.'

I told him the story of the first pit bull of my memory. Chesty was in our family from my earliest moments of recall. By the time I was ten years old, Chesty must have been eighty or ninety, figured in man years. But he was still undisputed king of the hill. Where he hoisted his leg and left his message he was seldom contested, even as he grayed and grew long in the tooth.

My younger sister, Janine, three years younger than I, had one love – a small gray alley cat she'd found in the kitchen one morning and adopted. Janine had one hero. Modestly, I must admit that it was I.

She believed me the most marvellous of human beings, infallible and brave and kind and strong. It was no good telling Janine that there might be something Tony could not accomplish. She simply refused to consider it.

She had lost her kitten. Whether some delivery person picked it up and dropped it in his basket at the kitchen door, or whether the little animal followed the fishmonger, or the meat cart, God knows. Stolen or lost, the cat was gone.

Janine was ill, inconsolable. She asked others to find her kitten, but she pleaded with me to bring it back, and it was easy to see in her mind I was her last and only hope.

One loves to be loved, admired, adored. And I had had all this for almost seven years from Janine. I hated losing it. I

looked everywhere. I questioned everyone, and each time I went near Janine, she looked at me, anguished, yet hopefully. I had failed her.

Well, I couldn't fail her. I simply could not stand to see her faith shattered, even in such an unworthy vessel as I. And I hated to have my own feet proven to be no more than cheap ordinary clay.

It seems ridiculous and childish now – but at the time I *was* a child – I discussed the matter with God. Hidden away in shadows I even got on my knees. I made broad, sweeping vows – if only He would help me, just this once. Let me find Janine's cat, and I would never ask anything of His supreme and busy holiness again. He would find me – if ever he looked for me again – docile, meek, uncomplaining and certainly undemanding. He might continue to have troubles from other quarters, but not from me.

From somewhere came the idea that Chesty might find the lost kitten. I had read of bloodhounds running down criminals against the crown after being given a shoe or article of clothing worn by the malefactor.

I ran and got the small blue pillow on which the kitten had slept. I held it in front of Chesty's pugged nose. 'Find the kitten, Chesty,' I pleaded. 'Please. Find her.'

He stared at me with those watery eyes. Angered, I shoved the pillow into his ugly face and said in fierce rage, 'Stop being stupid. You know what I want. Find the cat. Find the cat.'

He and I wandered around the house and the yard. I don't know whether he thought we were playing a game in which I frequently rubbed a blue pillow into his wrinkled countenance, or if he were just glad of my undivided attention. At the rear gate of our yard, he lost interest, and he chased an imaginary squirrel down the road, setting the other dogs to barking and, tired, I gave up.

Chesty did not return all that day. At dinner time, I carried his bowl to the rear yard and called and called, with no response. I went out, just at dark to the rear gate to search the road one last time. And there, incredibly, I found Chesty – and the kitten.

The kitten was dead. The scruff of its neck was caught in

Chesty's teeth and though he'd obviously, under great stress and in agony, bitten down involuntarily with all the force of his powerful jaws, he had not released his grip on her since he'd found her and started home with her.

Chesty was alive, but barely. He died within the hour. He lay on his side, holding the cat in his teeth and staring up at me, his beautiful eyes agonised. But he did not whimper. He died like the gentleman he was.

In horror, I saw he'd been attacked by a gang of dogs – in a pack or separately, I would never know. But with Janine's kitten in his ugly old mouth, Chesty was helpless and they killed him. His testicles and genitals had been savaged and ripped away. His fat stomach lay torn open, bleeding, but he had come home and he had brought Janine's kitten with him.

Janine and my parents and the servants joined me in giving Chesty and the kitten a funeral service worthy of the Vikings. We each spoke over their graves, giving our warmest memory. We made markers with names and dates of birth and death. We heaped flowers and burned a pyre as the pagans once had done to celebrate the passing of their finest.

'Janine never wanted another cat,' I said to De Lesseps. 'But I raised pit bulls after that. I seemed to need them – maybe to remind me of what I was not – and what, God knew, I ought to be.'

'A beautiful story,' De Lesseps said. 'But is it – fabricated?'

'Untrue?'

'Yes.'

'Why would I make up a maudlin story like that?'

'Oh, I don't believe you would. But it affects me deeply. And I am often deceived by what *sounds* true – because, as my family constantly reminds me, for all my experience and sophistication, I remain at heart naive and trusting. I believe good of every man until he himself proves himself unworthy. They warn me, I must not let people take advantage of my naiveté. And yet they do.' He laughed, a rueful, mirthless sound. 'They do. All the time.'

On the next day, at De Lesseps' invitation, I rode in his carriage to one of Said Pasha's villas, about a league from

Alexandria, on the Mahmoudieh Canal. He treated me as if I were more than an acquaintance. He behaved as if I were a long-time associate. I suppose I should have been grateful; he opened doors for me that I'd have found closed in my face; I met some celebrated and unique personages through him, and through him I watched whole pages of history unfold. But my reaction to him was far more complex. There was grudging admiration. He was an overwhelming person, with a charming personality. His interests were varied, he had a great store of knowledge on almost every subject, and an opinion on all issues; he was hesitant in speaking out on none. His was a youthful enthusiasm that was genuine and contagious, but this was part of my ambivalence about him. I could not believe a man could be so open and sincere. I saw it all as a calculated act, everything weighed in advance for its effect and reaction. I didn't trust the gentleman.

There was my natural British reserve. There was my objection to him and his mission: it was totally opposed by my government. I admit that I had accepted my government's official position towards the building of that canal. It was against British interests; it made easy, and invited, French adventuring and colonising in the middle-east. And I've seen that men adopt official attitudes matching the positions they're representing, almost as a man dons a uniform and accepts all it stands for. I watched this smiling, heartily masculine legend of a man warily. I was not going to be inundated under the torrents of his charm which swept over me like a well-directed hurricane.

At once, he apologised to me for an unscheduled stop he planned to make. 'I think it's not well for me to pass through Alexandria without calling at the French Consulate – no matter the friction between me and my government over certain issues. After all, they've heard my roars of protest over Italy around the world. I'm not trying to hide my true feelings.' He smiled. 'I never do.'

I said I would wait for him in his carriage, but he insisted that I accompany him into the French palace where he was received with great deference. The Consul Sabatier welcomed us at once. De Lesseps delivered some despatches to the Consul which had been entrusted to him in Paris.

He told Sabatier that we were on our way to visit Said Pasha at his villa. I waited for him to mention the purpose of his trek, but he said nothing of the canal though I knew this was foremost in his mind.

Sabatier treated De Lesseps with great warmth, begging him to take up his quarters in the French palace as long as he was in Alexandria. 'It must seem like home to you,' Sabatier said.

De Lesseps glanced around, smiling. 'Yes. It was built under my superintendence in 1835 when I was here as head of the consulate.'

As we drove towards Villa Cerisy, with escorts of Kawas and Sais, provided by Said Pasha, De Lesseps talked quietly on his favourite topic: himself. He was so unabashedly interested in his own history that it seemed no less than natural that everyone else should be at least as breathlessly engrossed.

He spoke in a disjointed way, following the flow of subconscious suggestion, leaping from the future – the building of the canal – to rousing moments buried deeply in his active, legendary past. He'd been born in Versailles in 1805 and was twenty years old when he entered the French consular service. His first post was as assistant vice-consul at Lisbon, Portugal where he served for two years and was already attracting much favourable attention and notice in public print. The following year he began his first official tour of duty in Africa at Tunis. By the time he was twenty-six, he was promoted to vice-consul and then two years later came to Cairo as full consul.

It was in Cairo that the dream of the Suez canal germinated. Here, he met again Mehemet Ali and his son Said Pasha. While he was in Egypt, he said, 'a plague broke out. It was devastating. There were literally thousands of deaths. None was spared, from the lowest Bedouin to the highest nobles. But from that horrifying experience came two good and lasting results.' He learned to respect Mehemet Ali for what he was inside, a noble-souled and beneficent man. 'He was strong; in many ways savage, as seen from our restricted view, but he was kindly towards the suffering and needy. It was his enemies who had to be alert

to stay alive.' De Lesseps almost smiled when he said this. 'And I was able to serve the Viceroy and his son in such a way as to earn their undying gratitude.' He said this quietly but without any hint of false modesty. 'If ever I am permitted a commission to build the Suez canal, I can assure you it will be directly attributable to the generosity of their love for me.' I had heard that De Lesseps had saved the Said Pasha's life when the youth had been considered beyond help, but he again surprised me by not going into any detail.

The plague brought him the memory of a violent insurrection in Barcelona in 1842 where he was consul. He had fought in the streets to protect the foreign colony. He had made headlines around the world and had been decorated, rewarded and praised lavishly by several nations.

By now he was a Consul-General and then Minister of France at Madrid. It was during these years that he was most friendly with Eugenie, Comtessa de Teba and her mother the Comtessa de Montijo. He drifted into some detail on the sometimes violent differences between himself and members of his own government while he was attempting to negotiate most delicate matters with Mazzini's new republican regime in Italy. His long government career service terminated abruptly and he was set afloat, sent into retirement, forgotten. He was left only with the dream which had driven and goaded and directed him for almost twenty years – the canal across the Suez.

The four miles to the Villa Cerisy went swiftly. I asked De Lesseps about his family, but he seemed vague and preoccupied. He loved his wife and children, he loved his country home at *La Chenaie*; but he was one of those men who could not be domesticated. He was career-obsessed. His work came first, his date with destiny drove him, the glory he saw gleaming like a holy grail ahead beckoned him – on a barren strip of land in eastern Egypt, forgotten, abandoned and despised by kings, sages and scientists since time began.

Upon our arrival at Villa Cerisy, I began to get some inkling of the respect and adulation in which De Lesseps was held by the Egyptians. Our carriage pulled up before the wide sun-struck staircase and the white limestone facade of

the palace. We found an entire staff of servants lined up awaiting De Lesseps' arrival. Each of them saluted him three times by stretching their right hand to the ground and then raising it to their forehead. The Frenchman took it all in his stride and whispered to me that these servants were Turks and Arabs, under the control of a Greek *valet de chambre* and a cook from Marseillaise named Ferdinand.

We were shown to our apartments and De Lesseps was promised that Said Pasha looked forward anxiously to welcoming him. As we waited, De Lesseps showed me around the residence. 'It was built by Monsieur de Cerisy, the celebrated French naval engineer. He was founder of the Arsenal of Alexandria, from which he has turned out twelve vessels of the line and twelve frigates in this short space of time. An incredible man! Under Mehemet Ali, de Cerisy contributed much to the enfranchisement of Egypt.'

The palace was a breathtaking spectacle. The chief pavilion rose from the centre of a beautiful garden between two avenues, one leading to the plain of Alexandria, the other to the Mahmoudieh Canal. We were told that this pavilion was occupied most recently by the princess who had presented Said Pasha with a son, named Toussoum.

Reception rooms and dining rooms were on the ground floor. On the first storey we had drawing rooms, elegantly furnished apartments, with luxurious divans all around and four large windows overlooking the two avenues. The bedroom, with soft canopied couch and fine yellow lamps, curtained, fringed and embroidered with gold, and supplemented by double inner curtains of a worked netting. Each of us had a first dressing room, well-stocked with perfumes and with rosewood and marble furniture, and beyond, a second dressing room, no less elegant, provided with large basins, silver ewers, and long soft towels, embroidered with gold, hanging from pegs. The kind of luxury that can be habit forming. I almost dreaded returning to the real world of puritanical England.

Presently, additional personal servants arrived, including a *Kaouadji bachi* (chief coffee-maker), accompanied by several assistants. He was followed by a *Chiboukchi bachi* (superintendent of pipes). He was escorted by four acolytes

with their insignia, consisting of a dozen long pipes with large amber bowls set with diamonds. Fresh pipes and little cups of coffee called *findjanes* are served to every visitor. It is the mark of the well-ordered home. I relaxed and enjoyed it. I would have had it no other way.

De Lesseps sent word that he'd been informed by one of the Viceroy's officers that his Highness would receive us at noon in his palace of Gabbari.

He did not bother telling me how we should dress. Since it was noon and hotter than the hole beyond hell, I dressed carefully in white linen suit and white shirt and shoes.

I was stunned to see De Lesseps in the corridor in dress coat, with enough medals and decorations and orders to light a room emblazoned on his not inconsiderable chest. I asked if I should change. He shook his head. 'You look – quite British. At ease in white. I simply reflected that, since I had known the prince when he was a boy – suffering the will of his strong and unforgiving father, and later miserable under his cruel uncle Abbas Pasha, I might please him by showing my deep respect for him in his present high circumstances. I decided it would be desirable for me to treat his Highness with the respectful deference that is always so acceptable to the human heart, eh? He has suffered a long time. He deserves every courtesy we can now accord him . . . Anyhow, I think it will please him that I arrive most formally and humbly.'

The Viceroy greeted De Lesseps cordially. He leapt up from his golden woven divan and embraced his old friend. Tears stood unashamed in his eyes. The Said Pasha's black eyes showed the faint swirling glint of old madness. The extreme suffering caused by his frequent headaches showed in his swarthy face too. His thick lips were a bright maroon and his underlip protruded roundly above his close-trimmed beard. Once in a while he gasped for breath. Said was an ill man.

Our audience persisted until late that night. The Viceroy talked of his childhood and of the way he had depended upon De Lesseps for protection, even from his own father's severities. 'You could talk to him in a way that no other man could – and keep his head intact upon his shoulders,' the

Viceroy cried in a thin, reedy voice, lilting with delight.

De Lesseps nodded. 'That was because my respect for him was deep and my love heartfelt. He knew my deep reverence for him. One cannot be deceived in such matters.'

'Sometimes I trembled for you,' Said Pasha said. 'When you took my side against him.' He grabbed De Lesseps' hands in both of his. 'Anyhow, I thank Allah you were there.' His voice pitched in a plaintive key. 'How I prayed to Allah for your comfort and protection during those evil years when I lived in virtual exile, actually under house arrest though no one ever admitted it, during the reign of my uncle Abbas Pasha.

'I endured persecution, misery and humiliation you would not believe under my uncle. It was a contest of wills. He wanted to drive me out of Egypt.' He laughed. 'He hoped to see my spirit and body broken, my self abandoned by friends, unable to stay in my native land. He wanted me to relinquish all claim to rule in this land. He wanted his own son to succeed him. But, I thought of you, dear Ferdinand, and like you, I persisted. I survived.'

'I prayed for you, Highness,' De Lesseps said in genuine sincerity. 'Often. I burned candles in your name. I asked our Gods to look after you.' Good Lord. Who but De Lesseps could have made a speech like that, kept a straight face and not be laughed at?

'But now I am Viceroy of my land. All my dreams for my dear country shall be brought to fruition,' Said Pasha said. 'As we used to talk in my youth, I shall do good and restore prosperity in Egypt. I shall do it, as Allah gives me breath.'

'I congratulate you, Highness, on your intentions,' De Lesseps said. 'I believe with all my heart that it is for some good end that Providence has entrusted what has been the most despotic Government on earth to a prince like yourself – to a brilliant mind, to one who received a good education when young, and who subsequently was sorely tried by adversity. We can look at it now and almost see the Almighty plan, eh?'

'I shall be all you want me to be,' Said Pasha said and laughed. 'Because I shall always carry you in my mind and

heart. I shall feel that you are watching me. After all I owe you, I should not want to be found unworthy.'

'That will never happen, Highness. I am convinced with all my heart that you will be worthy of your great mission. You will be recalled in adulation and awe by coming generations for your good works – and for your magnificent accomplishments. This I know.'

Said Pasha laughed happily, as a pleased child might. 'It is so good to have you back in Egypt! I feel the country itself is happier like this. Have they told you I wish you to accompany me across the desert to Cairo? You must come. You can simply join us on the adventure. There will be no need for you to make any preparations yourself. They will all be done in your dear name. It is settled.'

De Lesseps and I left the Viceroy's pavilion on the Mahmoudieh Canal at six o'clock in the morning, escorted by two mounted *Kawas* and two *Sais* on foot and followed by three led horses and two camels laden with baggage, most of it De Lesseps'.

We met the Viceroy's brother, Zulfikar Pasha at the Gabbari Palace. We had a mid-morning tea and then rode around Lake Mareotis to join with the Said Pasha's main party. To avoid delays all our baggage and camels were placed under care of the Kawas. After leaving the ancient baths of Cleopatra and the Arab tower on our right, we came to a well by which the Viceroy had encamped the previous night. He had started again at four a.m., to cross the lake where it was almost dry. Following the deep furrows made in the parched sand by the wheels of his carriage, and noticing how our own horses sank here and there in the crusted earth, we were able to judge the difficulties his troops had had to contend with already in their passage.

Throughout the entire ride, there was one topic of conversation, directed and dominated by De Lesseps. He discussed his canal project with Zulfikar Pasha, as though the Viceroy's brother were his most trusted confidante. Once, when we stopped for a rest in a small oasis, De Lesseps confided in me, smiling triumphantly, 'Zulfikar

Pasha is a dear old acquaintance of mine. With me, he fully recognises the importance of our great scheme to Egypt.'

'You're not afraid he might reveal ahead of time some of your plans?'

'Oh, no. I trust Zulfikar Pasha above all men. And he promises to use his intimacy and influence with his brother to prepare the Viceroy for a favourable hearing on my proposals for the canal.'

After we finally trudged and sloshed our way across the dry arm of the lake, we entered that part of the Desert of Libya which was formerly an inhabited and civilized country.

The area was no longer civilized or very inhabited. Zulfikar Pasha said the place had been abandoned to a few Bedouin tribes since the Arab conquest. Here and there, beside ancient stone-mouthed wells, we saw black camel-skin tents of the same kind alluded to in the Scriptures, and which are alike in Palestine, Syria, Arabia and along the whole coast of Africa from Egypt to Morocco.

The sky became slightly overcast and a faint breeze made it cooler than on the other side of the lake. We rode abreast, with De Lesseps in the middle, still talking about his attempts to get financial backing and governmental franchises for his canal project.

'A few years ago,' he was saying, 'the Consul General for Holland in Egypt, Monsieur Ruyssenaers, who loves and admires me and wishes me well, wrote that in his opinion there was no chance of getting Abbas Pasha to entertain the idea of the Suez canal.'

'My brothers and I suffered the torments of hell as long as Abbas Pasha lived,' Zulfikar Pasha said. 'My uncle was one of the only truly evil men, without redemption in the eyes of Allah, that I have ever known. I think he hoped to drive Said Pasha from Egypt, so that succession of Viceroy under the Turkish Sultan would proceed to his own sons, instead of to the oldest son of our father, Mehemet Ali.'

'Ironic, isn't it, that one of the concessions wrung from the Turkish Sultan by Mehemet Ali in 1838 was his demand that the governorship of Egypt shall forever be hereditary? That was also the year Mehemet Ali also refused to pay

further tribute to the Turks. He gained many successes against them. But his wish to see Said Pasha succeed him upon his death was foiled by his own rule of heredity – a brother supersedes a son. And so Abbas Pasha came to power.' De Lesseps swung his arm in a gesture of defeat. 'I could not simply give up and admit defeat after all those years. I communicated my project to my friend Monsieur Benoit Fould, the financier, who was about to take part in the formation of a Credit Mobilier at Constantinople. I hoped he might use his influence with the Turks. Fould was struck with the grandeur of the scheme and with the advantage which I pointed out of making the Suez Canal amongst the privileges to be demanded of Turkey.'

De Lesseps shook his head again, remembering. 'M Fould's agent in Constantinople met with such difficulties that they were forced to abandon the project. The Sultan admitted that since the canal was to be built in Egypt, the Viceroy alone had the right to undertake it. I was totally stopped again.'

We rode past a place where a wild dog was tearing a dead animal to pieces while birds of prey stalked patiently about, waiting their turn. Neither dog nor birds bothered to look up as we passed, they remained quite undisturbed by our presence.

Because we were making poorer time than De Lesseps liked, he suggested we eat in our saddles. He and Zulfikar, without drawing rein, took some biscuits and chocolate from their holsters. They shared them with me, advising me to fill my own holster in that way since pistols were unnecessary.

We caught sight of the Viceroy's camp from a rocky eminence. A Bedouin studied the distance and told us we should be there in half-an-hour. De Lesseps laughed. 'These peasants always shorten distances. They like to tell you what they think you want to hear. I judge we still have two hours at least to ride.'

We arrived at the camp at three in the afternoon, in intolerable heat. De Lesseps strode about seemingly unaware of it. I thought, *you are an almighty poseur. Even the camels are suffocating.*

The Viceroy was wisely enjoying his siesta in a great tent pitched for him beneath tall palms and opened with fragile awnings to invite the cross-currents of the breeze.

A slightly less elegant tent had been pitched for Zulfikar and for De Lesseps and me as his guests. Partitioned, boudoir tents were cool, furnished with iron bedsteads, deep mattresses, quilted silk coverlids, mats, folding chairs and a large mahogany table.

Pipes and coffee were brought at once, succeeded by basins and silver ewers. We were then sprinkled with rosewater, a ceremony which always immediately precedes a meal.

An elegantly prepared meal was served on trays set on stools before which we took our places. An appetizer of Baba-ghanoug came first. This dip, mashed baked eggplant, mixed with sesame paste, flavoured with lemon, garlic and olive oil, was served with toasted bread chips. Seven or eight courses followed. We had *Leban zabadi*, Egyptian yogurt which De Lesseps laughingly promised would help diminish any intestinal upsets. There were patties of mashed *fool* (the fava bean which is the staple of Egyptian diet) with finely chopped parsley, highly seasoned and fried in deep oil. This was followed by *fool mudhammas*, more fava beans cooked with spices, tomatoes in a thick sauce. The main course was *Kebab*, chunks of lamb with spices generously added. Our dessert was *Umm Ali*, a bread pudding topped with pine nuts and milk. I'd had no meal to approach this one in the finest hotel in Alexandria. These people knew how to live, even in the desert.

Military music announced that the Viceroy was awake. He sent an invitation for us to join him in his pavilion. He seemed rested and in good spirits, anxious to relate in detail to De Lesseps, whom he appeared to admire above all other men, and to seek his approval in everything, how he had inspired and led his artillery across the muddy arm of Lake Mareotis, galloping from one battery to another encouraging and urging on his men, exalting them to superhuman efforts.

'There were those who told us the passage could not be made, dear Ferdinand,' the Viceroy cried in glee, striding upon his carpeting in his bare feet. 'So, it was a point of

honour for us to accomplish it. You would have been proud of me, *mon cher*.'

'I *am* proud of you, your highness.' I stared at De Lesseps. He spoke like a headmaster complimenting a pupil for finally learning to spell Constantinople.

Said Pasha noticed nothing amiss, and neither did his consorts around him, so perhaps there was much beneath the surface here that I had no way of comprehending.

Said Pasha continued to pace. 'You will be even more proud of me and what I am accomplishing for my poor country when you see how I have trained my troops. Yes. We shall demonstrate in the morning.'

Soon after, the guests excused themselves, bowing and touching their foreheads to Said Pasha's toes. Zulfikar Pasha glanced towards me in what I interpreted as a hint that we withdraw. I bowed before the Viceroy, still fascinated by that wart on his instep. Zulfikar Pasha and I returned to our tents where we were pampered beyond belief.

About midnight, De Lesseps strode in. He looked swollen with excitement, with inner triumph that was going to keep him awake. I immediately thought he had spent all the time alone with the Viceroy promoting his canal. But he said they had not once mentioned the project in two delightful hours of stimulating conversation. 'Said Pasha was in exceedingly good spirits,' De Lesseps said to Zulfikar Pasha. 'We talked on many interesting subjects, all bearing rather directly on the Viceroy's wish to commence his reign with some great and useful enterprise that would stun and please the world. I listened to all he said with attention. As always, the prince seems to place his entire confidence in me.'

I laughed. 'And if he'd asked your advice, would you have suggested a certain ditch across the Isthmus of Suez as his greatest contribution to Egypt and mankind?'

De Lesseps found no humour in my remark. 'The time is not ripe,' was all he said. He paced the tent. He said a courier had arrived from Alexandria, bringing the Viceroy's correspondence from Constantinople by one of his own steamers. His highness had had the letters read aloud and

translated for De Lesseps' benefit and they had spent some time discussing the contents of each.

The packet consisted of despatches from his agent at Constantinople and from Reschid Pasha, the Grand Vizier. De Lesseps laughed mildly and said, 'You will be interested in this Zulfikar. Your brother showed me one letter from the Sultan's female favourite, thanking His Highness for a gift of 150,000 piastres. He was most proud because the letter also complimented the Viceroy on the part of his Imperial Majesty on the excellent condition of the Egyptian troops sent recently to serve in Turkey.'

The battle news was up to November 2nd, at which time the town of Sebastapol was not yet taken. The Admirals had given the Generals notice that the sea would no longer be tenable a month hence. 'This consideration will probably lead to some decisive attack that will cost the Allied Armies the lives of some ten to fifteen thousand men.'

He continued to prowl the tent, nodding and smiling to himself. 'On the whole a very delightful evening,' he decided.

Two regiments of the Viceroy's infantry, his élite soldiers, were due to arrive soon after dawn and Said Pasha was trembling with anticipation to demonstrate their capabilities to his old friend Ferdinand and to me as representative of a mildly friendly nation.

Noise of the soldiers leaving their tents wakened me about five.

I walked out of my tent into a morning scene out of Genesis. The men around me might have watched Adam trudge toward Nod. These bare and desolate plains, lit by moonlight and rimmed, between jagged eastern heights and lowering shoulders of swollen-bellied thunderheads, by strangely prehistoric hues and shades and slashes of daylight, were beautiful. Yet at the same time there was the sense of something troubling and threatening, a world lost out of time by man's puny reckoning, but still, in this strange half-light, raw and unfinished in some awful and eternal scheme of things. Nothing in my life in England had prepared me even for atmosphere like this, a crackling tension like static across the dunes and ridges and gulleys.

I was followed at once by De Lesseps. At least, the apparition proved to be the Frenchman. At first glance, I took him to be one of the true believers, and a stranger. He wore a red dressing gown down about his sandals. It was like a robe of a Scherif of Mecca. He stood washing his arms up to the elbows. He spied me and called, 'At the time of the Holy Inquisition, I should have been burnt alive, eh?'

Gaping, at the sight of him, I nodded, without inquiring as to why he might have been punished with tortures and *autos da fe*. By now I simply accepted that it would have happened – for cause.

'You know,' he said, 'washing the arms to the elbow was one of the high misdemeanours.'

I stared at him, disbelieving. 'You look more like a caliph than the Viceroy himself.'

'On my way to wish His Highness good morning,' he said. 'Would you care to join me? Said Pasha, like most of us, mistrusts most those he does not know. You must let him come to know you as well as possible.'

The Viceroy greeted us warmly, still excited about the arrival of his élite infantry. We smoked a pipe together, drank some coffee and, at Said Pasha's eager suggestion, mounted our horses, ready to receive the anticipated troops.

They came up over the sun-struck dunes. I was impressed. They were handsomely attired, in red jackets and plumed hats. Each man carried his weapon, and even in the sand they marched in time to military music and drum-marked cadence.

Halim Pasha, the Viceroy's brother in charge of the troops, rode ahead and greeted us. He reported his men in excellent condition. 'We marched out of Alexandria yesterday morning,' he said, 'with three biscuits for each man.'

My mouth must have sagged because De Lesseps explained. 'These Arab soldiers are most temperate. They seem to thrive on their abstinence.'

We sat in the orange-hued sunrise watching the troops pass in review. As we heeled our mounts about to return to camp, Halim Pasha called to De Lesseps, 'My Bedouin scouts report having sighted herds of gazelles two or three

hours march off, old friend. Perhaps we could arrange a hunting trip before we resume our journey.'

'I would like nothing better,' De Lesseps said. Looking at him, one would have thought him the happiest, least complex man on earth, perfectly content to play desert games with these dark-skinned fellows.

At ten o'clock we breakfasted with Said Pasha and his brothers in his huge pavilion. Halim Pasha had ordered his own tent pitched a league away from our camp, among his soldiers, and I gathered, as some sort of sign of respect towards his older brother. Directly after our meal of *fool mudhammas* with fried eggs on top, Prince Halim's horses were brought round and with much ceremony in parting, he swung up into his saddle and returned to his camp.

Said Pasha retired for his morning rest. De Lesseps invited me to ride with him and Zulfikar Pasha across the plains and into the hills beyond the encampments.

We rode swiftly in order to keep De Lesseps and his lovely horse in sight. He knew what a magnificent figure he cut on his Arabian steed and he allowed everyone to see him as he rode. It seemed to me that he never relaxed; at every moment he was playing a role – the manliest man of all men, the most heroic of heroic figures.

On one side of us the desert stretched to the edge of the world and toppled beyond its horizon. On the other side, from the rising hills we could see the sun sparkling on Lake Mareotis and the sea beyond.

I heard De Lesseps' sudden yell, like a madman. A large jackal had sprung up almost from beneath his horse's feet. De Lesseps rode in furious pursuit, laughing and yelling over his shoulder like an eighteen-year-old. Watching him, I had to remind myself this was a man almost fifty in chronological years. Then, I decided, no, De Lesseps would never be fifty. He would not permit it, not as long as youthful enthusiasms and youthful dreams and ambitions would keep him young. The dreams he was obsessed with could be accomplished only by young men; he would stay young until he'd made every fantasy come true.

Prince Zulfikar and I followed as best we could. De Lesseps chased the animal for some ten minutes, often

almost touching it with the end of his whip. He might have run it down, unable to admit defeat in anything, but he finally lost sight of the terrified animal in the underbrush.

He returned to us, panting, but refreshed and enthused. 'That big devil,' he said. 'You know why he was hiding up there, don't you? He was already in position to raid the camp tonight in search of food.' He laughed. 'We must tell the Viceroy how I scared the hunger out of one of his scavengers.'

*Tell the Viceroy.* I thought, *here is the key to De Lesseps and every dauntless, audacious deed he has accomplished. With every breath he is trying to impress the Viceroy and consorts with his manly superiority. They will tell Said Pasha, all right. If Prince Zulfikar doesn't find the opportunity to make a rousing tale of it, De Lesseps will. He is no shrinking violet.*

On our return, we found the Viceroy and his most trusted aides, including Prince Halim, outside his tent. They had set up a howitzer 450 metres from a target.

The skill of two companies was to be tested and displayed. 'Ah, dear De Lesseps,' Said Pasha called. 'We've been waiting for you.'

We stood by in the meagre shade of a palm while several shells were thrown. Though they were often near the mark, none actually hit it.

Finally, Said Pasha called a halt to the display. His face looked gray. One thought he might almost vomit. There was no mystery about the cause of the Viceroy's sudden malaise. He looked ready to fall to the ground in a fit of illness because of the failure of his gunners after the way he had boasted of their prowess the night before.

He spoke in low, constrained tones to Prince Halim. The troops must practise. 'You will take them ten leagues from my camp, and you will teach them to hit a target. Not once in a week, but every time.'

Prince Halim touched his forehead in a sign of respect and concurrence. It would be done.

Said Pasha still was not mollified. He looked around and spoke in a flat, dead tone. 'The trumpets of the cavalry disturb me too early in the morning. I want my tent

moved – at least 300 yards from where it presently stands. At once. I want some spot where I will be out of hearing of that annoyance of trumpets. I also want a clear space in front of my tent for setting up targets. I shall see that my infantry practises.'

Altogether, it was a tense and unhappy day, induced by and attuned to the frustrated mood of the Viceroy. Hundreds of men rushed about in desert heat moving and setting up the prince's pavilion in its new location and at the least inconvenience to his majesty. We heard the firing of howitzers and the rapid staccato fire of rifles off and on all day.

Said Pasha retired to his carriage bed. He wanted no midday repast but ordered dinner served to the rest of us. Our meal was prepared by a squad of some twenty-five or thirty cooks and scullions.

Zulfikar Pasha, De Lesseps and I went to have a look at the open-air kitchen where three rows of coppers ranged above holes in the earth, filled with burning faggots. 'Not an economical stove in its consumption of fuel,' De Lesseps told me. 'But one that can be very readily constructed.'

We returned to our tent to find a delicious meal awaiting us. Our meal over, the table was removed and our tent for a time became staff headquarters, with messengers coming to make inquiries. Zulfikar Pasha wrote letters and sent out couriers and gave orders in the name of his master.

Night closed in upon the camp and watchfires and hundreds of *machallas* were lit and placed about the avenues of the area. The Viceroy's military band struck up airs and marches of every nationality, including 'Marseillaise' and the 'Hymn of Riégo'.

The Viceroy joined us and tried to enter into the fun. His Egyptians, the most lively nation on earth, grouped themselves in the torch light before their tents and sang their national airs, beating time with their hands. But before ten, the Viceroy abandoned any pretence of pleasure. He abruptly announced he had lost his appetite and retired to his own tent, there to brood on the failure of his gunners.

I remember vividly, sometimes bitterly, often frustratedly,

mostly in sweated disbelief many scenes – in themselves disjointed, unrelated, irrelevant apparently, but which added up to me to demonstrate the arrogance and total self-absorption of De Lesseps – at least in my view. And I told myself I certainly felt objective about him. I felt as objective as hell.

There was a gift of a fine horse made by the Viceroy to De Lesseps. Said Pasha had sent to Syria for the animal and I must say it was worthy even of the magnificent Frenchman. I knew and loved horseflesh. Of course, I believed the British had best perfected the Arab strain since the first of that breed was imported during the reign of Henry I.

This animal bore all the fine points for which the pure blood Arab is justly celebrated. Of course, there is controversy about the breed. Arabs claim authentic pedigrees reaching back for more than two thousand years, while other breeders declare that before the thirteenth century the horses of Arabia were a poor race and lightly esteemed.

Whatever merits of the controversy, here was a noble descendant of the Arabic Kochlani, a perfection steadily maintained. Of the six breeds of pure Arab, the Dgelfe was the most prized because of its lofty stature, narrow chest, deep girth and long ears. They are remarkable for spirit and fleetness, but are exceedingly tractable. Their ability to endure hunger and thirst is incredible.

This two year old colt, which must have cost 3,000 Turkish ghurushes or piastres, whiter than the discoloured desert sands, but blending against them, stood proud, alert, clear-eyed, fit for a king.

I watched De Lesseps accept it politely, calmly, as no more than his due.

That same afternoon, we rode out with Said Pasha to review troops on a plain between Alexandria and Lake Mareotis. De Lesseps had never looked more dashing or noble than he did astride his new steed. He alone rode beside the Viceroy. The rest of us in his party, including the regent's brothers, rode sedately in their wake.

Soliman Pasha superintended the manoeuvres, which included field exercise. All during the exhibition, I saw De

Lesseps bending towards the fat little Viceroy, criticising, suggesting, advising, orating.

Jesus, I thought, the egotism and vanity of the man. Is there no subject on which he is less than infallible?

Said Pasha nodded constantly, drinking in the shared wisdom, and we could all see that though he saluted his troops, he was far less than satisfied with their performance, having seen it, as he had, through De Lesseps' jaundiced eyes.

As soon as he decently could, Said Pasha heeled his horse about and raced away from the review area. He looked gray and unhappy. As we galloped along behind him, I saw a large diamond ornament fall from the prince's cartridge box. He saw it fall, but refused to have it picked up. When I would have halted my horse to retrieve the gem, De Lesseps shook his head at me coldly, and I rode forward obediently.

# VIII

IBRAHIM WAS ANOTHER thorn in my side, a pebble in my sandal, one more drop in the slow water-torture of my relations with the intolerable De Lesseps.

Writing in brief detail about Ibrahim does more than vent my spleen, illumine a little more the strained relationship between the Frenchman and me – a strain of which I must admit De Lesseps remained totally unaware, or uncaring or unmoved. For a long time I never worked out which.

This vignette of Ibrahim will serve as graphic characterisation of the crafty, self-interested, amoral Copt when these urban, direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians become familiar with the Europeans.

In that hot land, time is unimportant. The word for everything is '*burka*' and '*burka*' means tomorrow – which in turn means 'sometime'. Or an even more enlightening phrase is their '*burka fil mishmish*' which means 'tomorrow when the apricots bloom' and this can stretch into unreckoned infinity.

Ibrahim had learned to put such words from his vocabulary. He discerned the European's passion for promptness, for moving swiftly and for carrying out orders immediately and precisely. As I discovered, Ibrahim uncovered and used to his advantage all the strengths, weaknesses, whims and notions of the strangers. He capitalised upon them.

He accosted me – running towards me, waving his arm as if he'd been sent to watch for me, a total lie – as I debarked the British packet *Heath* in the west harbour at Alexandria.

In white shirt, white duck pants and sandals, he was a thin, officious little person, with a great hooked nose,

glitteringly alive black eyes, an air of total authority and local wisdom.

As I stepped off the gangplank, before my legs were even steadied after the eternal sea voyage, before I could acclimate myself to the furnace blast of blazing heat borne of the first land breezes, he had bowed, smiling, and appropriated my portmanteau and suit carrier. 'It is all right, Master,' he said, his voice pitched soothingly. 'My name is Ibrahim. I have been sent here to meet you.'

I laughed at him. 'Impossible. Not only does no one know I'm arriving, no one cares.'

'Ah, but Master. How can you say this? The British Embassy knows. Are you not the Honourable Avylon Austin Anthony Hamilton, attaché to the British consul here at Alexandria?'

I admitted this much was true.

He nodded smiling as if all confusion had been cleared away. 'You are too modest, Master. You see, I knew you were coming and I cared – and I was sent to meet you.'

I shook my head, still laughing; his brashness was charming. 'By whom?'

'By Allah, Master.'

I reached for my bags, but he retreated, grinning. Not wishing to contest him publicly for possession of my property, I laughed again. 'All right. I'll give you a couple of silver piastres to see me into an *arabiyeh*.'

'Of course, Master.' He turned, running along the palm-fringed walk towards El Bahariya. I had to yell him back and tell him we could go nowhere without my pair of pit bulls which had to pass through customs of their own. 'Do not worry, Master. If you will give me the chit for the animals, I will take care of the matter and expedite it as well.'

I loved that word expedite. I grinned, won over by the wily little arab. He set down the bags and touched me on the arm reassuringly, smilingly, stroking me. The Egyptians are a body people. They believe as strongly in touching as the British regard it in polite horror.

Well, by the time Ibrahim had me settled in a suite in a *lukanda* – a pleasant enough hotel near the British Embassy,

the little devil had won my heart. I even began to wonder, as he put my clothes away neatly and expertly, how I'd made it all the way south from London without him.

He walked my pit bulls. He handled all details of my ordinary existence easily, anticipating my wants in advance in an uncanny way. His officious manner and the imperious way he spoke my name – all the given and surnames – to underlings won each of us a great deal more respect, attention, courtesy and prompt service than we likely deserved.

By the time I had joined the Said Pasha's imperial *khan* headed across the desert towards Cairo, I had come to depend upon Ibrahim more than upon my own right arm. He possessed far more resources as my servant than my position in the British Government provided to me personally. The way he spoke my name opened doors and performed amusing magic. He made life in this fetid climate far easier for me and he knew shortcuts through all bureaucratic redtape. I soon became less irritated by his eternal habit of touching, caressing, petting. I accepted him. I depended on him. I relaxed and let him run my ordinary life. I thanked Allah for having sent him.

'Why did you choose me that day in the harbour?' I asked him once.

'My former master had transferred to India,' Ibrahim said. 'I was at a loss. And one must not take lesser positions in this world. One must always advance his fortunes, Master. It redounds upon one to be in the service of a distinguished personage like yourself.'

'I am not all that exalted,' I said more in honesty than modesty.

'You were the most exalted arrival that day on the *Heath*,' he replied. 'I found out – for I must serve only the most superior.'

Flattered, I grinned, accepted my tamped pipe from him and said no more.

Imagine then, my shock, sickness and outrage when as abruptly as he'd attached himself to me, he deserted my service at our encampment on the Mareia, a place of ruins called Gheil in Arabic. He abandoned me as he had accosted

me and forced himself upon me – without warning or any prior notice.

I heard taunting laughter and joking outside the regal-sized tent in which De Lesseps was quartered. I wandered to the edge of the gathered crowd and peered easily over their heads into the circle they'd made around the object of their derision. Stunned, I found the principals in this raucous charade to be Ferdinand De Lesseps, standing god-like and my own *sufragi* Ibrahim, prostrated on his knees before him.

De Lesseps was smiling – with that remote smile a god might bestow from some high tor of Olympus. The others, mostly native servants, soldiers and animal tenders, shouted their amusement, and De Lesseps' smile probably equalled belly-laughter in a less august personage.

'No. No. You could never have been under my protection in the thirties,' De Lesseps was saying. 'I have never seen you before.'

'Please, great one. Your mind, occupied with serious matters, has merely pushed my lowly self aside in my unworthiness.' Ibrahim had clutched the front of De Lesseps' red dressing gown in trembling fingers. 'The Mehemet Ali was alive. I was apprenticed in your party. You were kind to me. A mere boy. You promised if ever you returned to our land, I – and I alone, revered one, should serve you as your body servant.'

'Impossible.'

The men around Ibrahim laughed at him as if he were a buffoon – which he certainly resembled, craven and begging, and on his knees in the sand.

Zulfikar Pasha said to De Lesseps, 'Some of these people hope to lift themselves in this way – attaching themselves to the most distinguished noble available. He has seen you treated with more distinction and respect than anyone else in the Viceroy's suite – and now he will be ill until he can be part of your entourage.'

'Please,' Ibrahim wept. 'For the sake of my family – my sainted father and mother. Their good name. For my own humble sake, honour me, sire, by letting me serve you in the most menial ways . . . I ask nothing more than to serve you

as your meanest slave . . . You are the apple of my eye, sire. I am shaken with adoration for you. I kiss your feet. I will remain your most humble servant as long as you are in Egypt.'

De Lesseps smiled faintly. 'You must be someone's servant, else you wouldn't be here. Won't your present master miss you if you desert him?'

Ibrahim wailed. 'Oh, he wants me to serve you, Master. It was he who sent me to you.'

The laughter raged again. Everybody knew Ibrahim was lying, but Ibrahim did not care what anybody thought of him at this moment, as long as he got what he wanted. When De Lesseps turned to move away, Ibrahim crawled after him, on his knees, sobbing like a sick camel through the braying laughter that pelted him like stones.

Finally, seeing that he could not reasonably be rid of Ibrahim – and I well knew that feeling – De Lesseps glanced towards the Said Pasha's brother. Zulfika Pasha grinned and shrugged. 'Why not take him on? He is a good servant – though totally immoral . . . it's up to you.'

'All right.' De Lesseps swung his arm. 'My tent needs water, for drinking and for bathing, as do my horses. See to it, Ibrahim, and we'll see how you work out.'

Weeping, Ibrahim kissed De Lesseps' feet, the hem of his red dressing gown. Then he sprang up, grabbed urns and ran off towards the half-ruined reservoir among a dozen or so horse-shoe arches and the broken shafts of antique columns, yellowed relics from the days of the Roman conquests. The desert remains, I thought; and people like Ibrahim; only the conquerors come and go as the winds.

Enraged, I sat in the shadows of my tent. At last, like a thief in the dark, Ibrahim sneaked in to gather his handful of meagre personal belongings which he wrapped stealthfully in a bright large cotton handkerchief.

I let him prepare to leave before I spoke. The sound of my voice startled him so that he cried out. He jumped a foot. He trembled. He stood poised to run and not looking towards me.

'Where are you going, Ibrahim?' I inquired in my gentlest tone.

'They have sent for me, Master.'

'Oh? Have they? And who is that? Is it Allah who has sent for you?'

'There is the imperial demand that I labour in the tent of the Master De Lesseps. It is not my wish. I fought against the very idea of deserting you. They would not listen.'

'Ah. You have my deepest sympathy, Ibrahim.'

'The Master De Lesseps. He is most distinguished. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the Viceroy himself. It is a great honour they do me. Nothing could make me leave you otherwise.'

'You are a liar,' I said in that same mild tone. 'You forced yourself upon me. You make me depend on you. You lead me miles into the desert, away from any other available servant – and you desert me.'

'It breaks my heart to leave your dear self, sire. But there is nothing I can do. I have been ordered to the tent of the great De Lesseps.'

'By Allah Himself, undoubtedly.'

'I must serve as Allah dictates. It is written. A man can't fight against his destiny, Master.'

The Viceroy was out of his tent at seven the next morning, though still slightly indisposed. One could see it was in his pride where he really ached. It was easy to feel sympathy for him. He wanted so fiercely to excel, for his people to excel, and he was not one to recover quickly from failure, frustration or humiliation. Every failure of his people was his own failure.

Halim Pasha rode over. We mounted up for a ride before breakfast which would be served at ten. Prince Halim and De Lesseps invited Said Pasha to ride with us, but he refused, saying that riding would only aggravate his mild cold.

We returned to find him watching his men practise firing at a target set up at 500 metres. I winced for the poor Viceroy at the dreadful showing of his riflemen. None of them had yet come within the target circle, though Said Pasha patiently encouraged them and urged them to try again, and again and again.

One could see the little fat man growing sicker by the minute. He saw us approaching but turned his head and would not look at us, unable to face us in his shame.

De Lesseps watched for a moment and then swung down from his saddle. He touched his forehead and spoke to Said Pasha. 'I believe I might be of some modest assistance, your eternal majesty, if you would permit.'

Unable to speak, Said Pasha merely waved his arm, giving De Lesseps carte blanche with his inept army.

I could not believe De Lesseps' presumption. I could never have thrust myself forward in such a situation. The Viceroy had all the despair he needed. He didn't need to have his nose rubbed into it by a domineering alien, no matter the benignity of his intentions. Anyhow, he took over as I never could – or would have. The British simply don't do things like that. We never volunteer information, or thrust ourselves forward unasked. In fact, a national trait is our reluctance to give advice on the most trivial matters. We dislike being pushy; we dislike pushy people. I call it a matter of sensitivity, and I found De Lesseps, as usual, totally insensitive to Said Pasha's anguish in that sad situation.

Well, obviously, De Lesseps didn't see any of this. And I stood, my throat taut, my nostrils twitching and watched the arrogant fellow stride in and take over as if he had been asked – and he certainly had not – but as if he himself had invented and refined target shooting.

He walked out in the blazing sunlight to the firing line. He spoke for a moment with one of the junior officers. He then took the rifle and showed all the men along the line how to hold it correctly and to best advantage in taking aim and controlling recoil by resting the butt-end firmly into the shoulder. He showed them over and over how they had been loosening the trigger and getting the full impact of the sudden rebound.

Even Said Pasha stopped sniffling and moved closer to watch.

The colonel in charge of the infantry begged De Lesseps to add example to precept. De Lesseps bowed and nodded. He checked the gun carefully, socked it into his shoulder as I

had seen gunnery sergeants do at Sandhurst. He aimed, fired, and hit the target exactly in the centre.

A shout of approval and admiration went up from every throat along the long line of frustrated men.

Said Pasha almost smiled. He wiped the back of his sleeve across his nostrils and sent for his own gun, custom-made and of German manufacture. He insisted that De Lesseps try the gun and give him his evaluation of it. 'I have been far less than happy with it,' the Viceroy admitted.

De Lesseps wasn't even hesitant. He loaded the rifle, hefted it and addressed the target, which he hit, dead centre, the very first shot. He made no further attempts, but spent the hours until the break for breakfast teaching the gunnery officers how to instruct their men. Before we left the firing line, many of them were coming within the target lines consistently; some even hit the bulls-eye, to shouts of delight from a hundred throats.

We returned to our own main tent, where breakfast was waiting. I stared at him in disbelief. I managed to say, 'Suppose you'd missed that target?'

He shrugged. 'Oh, I knew I wouldn't. And you saw, *mon cher*, how I quit when I was ahead? I took no chances on compromising my newly acquired reputation as marksman, eh? I knew what would impress them. That was all. I did just that much, my friend, and then stopped.' He looked up from his food and smiled faintly. 'I thought I handled it well.'

'Oh, they were impressed,' I said. 'They were very impressed.'

He nodded. 'Yes. They were, weren't they? I'm sure that will count for me when I need it . . . . And that's all that matters.'

Even on that firing range, with a thousand men watching him, he had been thinking only of his canal.

A Sheik Masri came in to visit De Lesseps. I excused myself, but De Lesseps invited me to stay. Sheik Masri had been with Said Pasha during the dark years of the reign of Abbas Pasha. He had given support and succour to the prince when he'd been persecuted by his uncle. Masri was now attached to the Viceroy's household and was a favourite of the prince's.

He told us about a war which had broken out six months ago between his own tribe of Oulad Aly and a much larger horde from Upper Egypt. Oulad Aly occupied the desert between Lake Mareotis, on the coast and the frontiers of Tripoli. They cultivated the delta districts bounded by the canals which separated the desert from Lower Egypt. Theirs is comparatively rich soil and often coveted by neighbouring tribes.

The tribe of Oulad Aly, Sheik Masri said, numbered 50,000 souls. 'We can arm 10,000 men. We expected an attack from our enemies. We knew they were instigated by Abbas Pasha, in retaliation for our support of young Said Pasha. We armed ourselves to resist – to the number of more than 6,000, many of them women. These women were to cheer on our fighting men with cries and shouts and drum-beat. They entrenched themselves behind earth-works and fascines near Hoche, a village we shall pass tomorrow in our journey.'

He said pridefully that the attacking tribe lost 300 men. 'Of our own people, beseiged as we were, we escaped with four women and three men slain. Some of the women were mounted on camels and were much more exposed than the men.' He laughed, obviously wishing to impress De Lesseps whom he now regarded only slightly under the ancient gods. 'Those Bedouins from Upper Egypt took to flight, and they have never reappeared.'

The trek south resumed an hour before daybreak.

I sat mounted in the oasis on a slight eminence with Zulfikar Pasha and Clot Bey and watched the caravan move out.

Ten thousand men passed in the earliest morning light. Perhaps in the days of the Caesars one may have witnessed such pomp and ceremony and splendour. I admit to staring like a child, breathless and incredulous.

For a young Briton, weaned on the changing of the palace guard at Buckingham, the coronation of Queen Victoria and weekly displays of regal spectacle and military might, a desert caravan of the Egyptian Viceroy should have been something to be taken in one's stride. But against that early

blazoning sun, it was an exhibition of men, horses, camels and gear unmatched in my memory.

Everything had moved at a speeded up pace which in itself was unusual and unlikely in this desert. By the time our portmanteaus were packed – De Lesseps always packed his own; he would never let anyone do it for him even after he acquired Ibrahim – our bedding was folded up. Our horses were saddled and waiting for us. There was tension crackling in the very atmosphere. While servants served us coffee a cannon announced the order to raise the camp. In a trice it was accomplished, quickly and expertly, everything packed in mule-drawn carts. In an instant thousands of tents were rolled up and packed on camels. Ten thousand men came running and fell into orderly lines, in full uniform and carrying full pack.

The baggage caravan was the first to pass before us, and turning its back on Lake Mareotis, it struck out for the desert, soon looking like a long red ribbon unrolling itself across the sands.

Formed in three columns and flanked by skirmishers and followed by the artillery and cavalry, the infantry regiments climbed into the glittering sunlight. The Viceroy now mounted, with De Lesseps on his right and Selim Pasha, his cavalry general on his left. Selim sat astride his horse like a true professional soldier. He'd been educated at the school of Ghizeh and De Lesseps often reminded us that he'd been present at Selim's debut, under the French colonel Varin, in 1833. They galloped off to take up a position on an eminence where they could watch the army file beneath them. The soldiers cheered and presented arms as they passed Said Pasha and his celebrated guests.

Their weapons gleamed in the sun. A squadron of cuirassiers wearing the old Saracean helmet looked particularly distinguished. The brown faces of the Arabs were well set off by these ancient helmets.

The army past, Said Pasha and party rode to the head of the army, preceded by a dozen mounted Bedouins who served as scouts and guides. Military music blared loudly across the rolling hillocks.

I had never seen anything like it. Speechless, I stared in

wonder at the ostentatious elegance, the luxury, the overwhelming magnitude of the caravan, the incredible logistics involved. One might compare it to a parade of Kubla Khan. No mid-east or eastern potentate travelled in more swagger and ceremony than Said Pasha.

The Viceroy was already far ahead. We overtook his carriage at Hoche. He was resting in the tent of the provisional governor. More than one hundred Bedouin chiefs of the tribe of Oulad Aly gathered in the village. They stood, like figures carved of bronze, tall, elegant, fine-looking men.

For the brief stay of four hours, tents were set up for Said Pasha and his royal party. The caravan resumed its trek across the delta at three o'clock. We were preceded by some Bedouins who escorted us on both sides, carrying their rifles upright as they rode. Every now and then they set spurs to their horses, wheeled round and fired off their guns.

'They call that a *fantasia*,' Zulfikar Pasha told me.

We arrived at Zaoui-el-Khamour at sunset. The Viceroy sent word that he was much improved, but preferred to take a light meal alone.

At nine that night, Paolini Bey came with an invitation to join his highness the Viceroy in his pavilion. As we walked across the oasis darkness, we heard singing accompanied by tambourines and castanets.

A group of *Almehs* from a nearby town had been given permission to perform in the august presence of the Viceroy. He lounged among pillows on his divan, upon which he made room for De Lesseps. I sat with the prince's brothers and the others of his party.

The *Almehs* sang squatting in a cirle on the carpet. One of them was ostentatiously and luxuriously attired. One of the prince's brothers whispered, 'That hussy has wrapped herself in 10,000 francs' worth of embroidery and jewellery.'

The singing consisted of verses in honour of the Viceroy. At occasional intervals the *Kaouadji bachi* (chief coffee-maker) went in front of the performers. He patted their cheeks as if they were children and gave them sweets and syrups. When the singing was over, two *Almehs* got up and,

standing opposite each other, much like Spanish ballet-dancers, began to dance in a sensual and exotic way to erotic music. Two others succeeded them. Then the whole troupe passed before the Viceroy. They knelt and kissed his feet respectfully, and retired.

It was easy to see that the Viceroy was much improved and very nearly happy and that he was almost childlike in his gratitude towards De Lesseps.

At De Lesseps' insistence the next morning, the Viceroy agreed to travel at ease in his carriage. This conveyance was a kind of omnibus, with sleeping accommodations inside and was drawn by six mules.

The magnificent caravan passed across a cultivated and partially inundated plain. Even the saddle horses found the going difficult. In places we dismounted and led our bogged animals, slogging along, staring at our reflections in the mud-darkened water.

The land we crossed was part of the Delta as we went south east from Alexandria through some of the most fertile land in Egypt. This delta, formed by the two main branches of the Nile in Lower Egypt, the Rosetta on the west and the Damietta on the east, is a vast triangle of fertility. Still, it was rough going, in places almost impossible. I must not give any impression of lush growth-lands and shaded areas. It was just that my hosts *said* this was the most productive and least savage region of the country. All I can say is – thank God! If this was the least rugged, I did not see how men and beasts crossed the truly desolate wastes!

We trudged finally to a little inlet, a cool and charming oasis in that heat, shaded by tamarind, sycamore, willow and mulberry trees and surrounded by a shard of water as insulation, and forming a little circular area of shaded refuge from the sun. It was a delightful oasis, and I rode into it with a sense of release and thankfulness. We could look back across the sand hillocks and dykes we had crossed and sigh that we'd made it, and feel pity for the uniformed troops and heavy artillery who had yet to traverse the badlands.

The Viceroy remained in his carriage until a message was

brought to him saying that the heavy artillery could not cross the sand dunes or the slough. A dozen horses had already succumbed to heat and fatigue.

'I'll have to return on horseback so my presence can inspire and encourage them,' the Viceroy said, his runny nose red and leaking, his eyes betraying his inner misery; but his resolve seemed firm and honest enough.

And the prince would have been permitted to mount a horse, as ill as he was, and to lead a detachment of men with mules, ropes and winches to rescue the stalled artillery. Few of his party even volunteered to accompany him.

But when the work detachment was formed and ready to ride out on the back trail, De Lesseps refused to allow his old friend the prince to accompany the party.

'It is a brave and noble thing,' De Lesseps said. 'But you're too ill. We cannot take a chance on your health worsening through over-exertion. I'll go in your place, Highness, if you will allow it. It won't be the same as the inspiration of your majesty's presence, but I promise to get the job done.'

The Viceroy was only too willing to be talked out of making that arduous trek across mud and sand dunes. He agreed at last to allow De Lesseps to take his place as commander of the rescue mission, though he did so with a great show of reluctance.

I couldn't stand there and allow De Lesseps to go without all the assistance we could muster. I was so damned tired I could hardly stand. The backs of my legs quivered and I was totally sweated down. The very idea of returning into that mire and maze of sand hills and breathless sand pits was a nightmare. But De Lesseps was twenty years older than I, an ageing man despite what he thought. He needed all the help he could get. I could not escape.

'I'll go along with you,' I offered.

But De Lesseps shook his head. 'It's all right, dear boy. It's been a long day, a hellish ride. Rest.'

'I'm half your age, man. I'm in decent shape. Let me help.'

'It's a long rough trip ahead. You'll be better off if you get all the rest you can.'

'So would you,' I said.

He gave me a faint smile. 'But I do what must be done,' he said.

'Don't you want me along?'

'Frankly, I don't. You'd only be another responsibility. You may well be a better man than any of us, you understand. But that quality is unknown to me. Not tested. And I'll be quite busy – hardly able to look out for you.'

I stared at him, incredulous. I couldn't believe what I saw and heard, experienced through my own senses. I saw what he was doing not as kindness towards me or the Viceroy, but another bit of his grandstanding, his proving himself the most worthy of mortals. While I stood, overwhelmed by his audacity, he strode out, shouted orders for the hundred riders, workers and animals to accompany him and then galloped off along our back trail, as if he were the youngest man in the desert, as well as the strongest and ablest.

The Viceroy ordered a circular parapet of stone, picked up on the spot, erected before his tent by his light infantry. This may have been done partly to show them what might befall them if they didn't improve their marksmanship. Anyhow, an embrasure was then made, through which a cannon was positioned.

Said Pasha had the camp in smart military readiness for the delayed arrival of his heavy artillery and troops. About two hours before the late desert sunset, the heads of the columns could be seen in the brilliant afterglow. A thrilled cry of victory went up from the men and the Viceroy personally directed the firing of the cannon in salute of the plodding forces.

One could see, after the smoke of the explosion rolled away on the breeze, De Lesseps erect and handsome astride his white Syrian steed.

As the troops neared, their band struck up lively martial music. Though every man and animal struggled, exhausted, across the deep sand hillocks, one saw them straighten their shoulders and they marched past Prince Said, smartly slapping their hands against their legs, their faces fixed, at attention.

And at their head, De Lesseps rode, proudest of all. Though he must have been trembling with fatigue – having crossed those deep sand hillocks and sloughs twice while exhorting soldiers and animals to superhuman effort, and often lending his thick shoulders and muscular legs in demonstration – he tilted his head and forced his weary horse to prance in cadence to the music!

I couldn't believe it. The encampment went wild applauding and cheering his heroic return. As the troops and colours passed where Said Pasha stood at attention, eyes glistening with prideful tears, each man in step with the fast tempo of the music, one saw tears standing deep and unashamed in all eyes. *My God*, I thought, *what won't this man do to win their adulation?*

What would he do? Well, he was about to show me, this fifty-year-old superman. De Lesseps looked the conquering hero, smiling, swaggering, but he was not finished yet. Not by a league. As he approached the stone parapet, he saluted Said Pasha, touched his heels almost daintily to the flanks of his steed. The animal seemed to respond eagerly and instinctively to his wishes. The beautiful horse, its mane flying, its agony of exhaustion totally concealed, raced forward and cleared the stone parapet with a bound. Then De Lesseps, keeping him under perfect control, galloped past to his tent.

The entire bivouac broke into roars of approval. Their shouting rose – above the music – faded, and rose again and again. The Prince joined lustily in yelling with his men. I smiled and shouted too. There can be little approval more exalting to the human psyche than the voiced happy roars of 10,000 men.

When I walked down to the main tent I shared with De Lesseps and Zulfikar Pasha, I found the Frenchman standing erect near the tent staring into the distance.

He called to me and pointed outwards across the crusted sands. I saw a magnificent rainbow of the most brilliant hues, one end dipping into the east, the other into the west. Against the sun-purpled crags and endless shadowed dunes that prismatic arch reared, etched in hard, bold clarity.

'Look at that,' De Lesseps said as if the display were for

his delight alone. 'Isn't that beautiful? I've never beheld a lovelier *arc-en-ciel*. I suppose it's the clarity of the desert air. I must confess to you, the sight of it makes my heart beat violently. One could almost conclude this is the sign of the covenant alluded to in the Scriptures – proof of the arrival of that moment for the true union of the West and East.'

'Or it could be double refraction of the sun's rays in rain, dust and shattered sunlight,' I suggested, joking.

He barely heard me; at any rate, I was aware that he was almost totally humourless. 'Anyhow,' he said, 'I take it as a sign, my dear boy. This is the day marked out – at last and by that rainbow – for the start of the success of our scheme.'

I felt illness gorge up through me. Helplessly, I realised that De Lesseps had reached a moment of action, and there was nothing I could say to delay or deter him. No one expected me to stop him – only to report on his *lack* of progress – and yet I felt I was failing my obligations to Her Majesty's government.

De Lesseps believed the moment had come to promote before the Viceroy himself his grandiose plans for his canal across Suez, but I did not believe it had anything to do with auguries as abstract as visions, Scriptures or rainbows. I saw his decision as one made coldly in his pragmatic recognition that the time was ripe, the iron hot, the moment ready, because he had these people where he wanted them – entranced in the palm of his thick-fingered hand. Who was more idolised than he by 10,000? He could jump a stone parapet on a tired horse. He could hit the bullseye everytime with a rifle. He could engineer artillery through treacherous sand and slough. Good Lord, if he'd thought it would have sufficiently impressed them, he'd have slain a lion in a snowy pit. How could any Egyptian doubt that he could dig a navigable ditch across seventy metres of hellish terrain, one abandoned by learned scientists since beginning of recorded time? They would believe *he* could do it because he would tell them he could, and he had yet to fail at anything. He was ten feet tall in their eyes.

But I had failed totally. There was no way – given my low status in government – that I could present the British

opposition in this place where De Lesseps stood like a god.

That night at dinner, I saw demonstrated the reverence with which De Lesseps was regarded by the highest echelon of Said Pasha's advisers and administrators. The Generals were guests, along with twenty or thirty of the Viceroy's personal entourage, that night. Each of the military leaders complimented De Lesseps extravagantly on his accomplishments. He accepted their accolades graciously, but I felt I alone could see secret triumph glittering in his eyes. His boldness today had greatly enhanced the esteem of the military minds. He had accomplished what he wanted.

We walked with Zulfikar Pasha to the dining area – long carpets set under tent shells, barricaded with pillows and set with places for sixty, each guest with his own server standing at his shoulder, an orchestra on a raised dais in unobtrusive shadows, with silver service and silver goblets for the Europeans.

De Lesseps said confidently to us, 'I firmly believe the Viceroy is now sufficiently prepared by all our previous conversations to recognise the canal as that glorious and breathtaking project with which he must begin his rule in Egypt. How he will be admired around the world once we are successful! I have been able to make him see the advantage to his government – and to every government involved – of having the great public utility financed and developed by private financial enterprise. Too, I am most encouraged by the happy omen of the rainbow. I truly hope this day won't pass over without a decision favourable to our scheme from his highness.'

The Viceroy welcomed us at the fragilely draped entrance of the dining area. He was smiling, his round face glowing with warmth. In high good humour, he took De Lesseps' hand, held it tightly in both of his for a long time and then insisted that he sit beside him at his right hand upon the divan.

De Lesseps appeared at ease. He looked rested – though he must have been inwardly trembling with exhaustion. He had not had a moment's rest since his return with the heavy artillery. His self-control and coolness were incredible when one realised he was poised to win or lose here tonight and

that he believed this moment the last perfect time for broaching the question of the canal – on which hung his whole future, reputation and honour.

I was placed by protocol far down the serving table and could hear nothing De Lesseps said to the Viceroy. I didn't need to hear. I saw him propound his scheme – and its merits and potential as the greatest modern achievement, and all in the name of the immortalised Said Pasha. The Viceroy would live forever, as long as that canal joined those two seas. This was neither the time nor place for details and I knew that De Lesseps dispensed with them.

At last, I saw the Mohammed Said smile. He clapped his hand for silence and then spoke loudly enough for all of us to hear, though he addressed De Lesseps directly: 'I am convinced. I accept your plan. We will talk about the means of execution during the rest of this journey. I pledge to you my honour and my fortune and my life. Consider the matter of the canal settled, before Allah. You may rely upon me.'

At Said Pasha's command, all the Generals attended in polite silence while De Lesseps repeated in essence what he had said to the prince. Said Pasha then said, 'I want you each to give your opinion of these proposals of my dearest friend.'

I grinned inwardly at the way Said Pasha laid heavy stress on those last three words. What could his Generals do, even if they'd harboured reservations on a vast enterprise of which they couldn't in the least appreciate either the cost in piastres or the significance in Egypt's relations with the great powers of the West?

What happened was that they all faced De Lesseps as robots. Each smiled, each nodded and complimented him on the magnificence of his scheme. One saw they were really expressing their admiration not for his proposed canal – the dimensions of which were far beyond their comprehension – but for the ease with which he'd cleared that stone wall on horseback.

Each raised his hand to his forehead toward Said Pasha in sign of assent.

It was done.

I couldn't sleep and, after preparing my report to the

consul at Alexandria and leaving it sealed with the courier for morning dispatch, I walked for a long time in the desert darkness.

Most of the lights were out in the thousands of tents. The torches flickered wanly, the campfires were doused. I saw lamps bright in De Lesseps' personal boudoir tent.

I entered, finding him busily scribbling at an oak table which was littered with papers. Ibrahim was there in a corner, but he busied himself polishing boots and did not glance up at me though I spoke his name cordially.

'You must be exhausted,' I said to De Lesseps. 'After all you've been through today.'

'Oh, no. I may have been tired for a while. But our victory tonight took thirty years off my age, all weariness off my shoulders, all doubt out of my blood. I am renewed. Refreshed. I am far too excited to rest. I could not lie still on a bed. I want to yell and dance in jubilance. Twenty years of studying and planning and now I have won the right and the franchise to build! I feel delirious. Fevered. Intoxicated. Besides, those things I did today were merely physical, affecting only my muscles . . .I have to do those things you know, or we'll never get our canal.'

'Our canal?' I spread my hands and stared down at him. 'My government will undoubtedly call an emergency session at number nine Downing Street when they get my report.'

He actually laughed aloud. 'Yes. I suppose they will . . . I have faced British opposition before. Something like the stubborn will of those pit bulls of yours. Fifteen years ago, I pleaded with the Mehemet Ali for the commission to build this canal. To this moment I vividly remember the look on the face of the British Consul when Mehemet Ali refused me that franchise. There was a smile that said plainly that though the words of refusal came from Mehemet Ali's lips, the victory in my defeat belonged to Britain.'

'We feel much the same today,' I said.

'Yes. But you and I – we will make them see, won't we?'

I could not make him see that I opposed him totally, that in my humble way I spoke for Lord Derby. Finally, I said only, 'You'd better rest.'

He smiled, thanking me for my concern, but shook his

head. 'No. I'm working on my minute on the canal – '

'Your minute?'

'Rough draft. Minute. The presentation the Viceroy expects me to make once we're on his yacht on the Nile.'

'Will others be present at this presentation?'

'To make objections?'

I smiled. 'If they have any.'

He shrugged. 'That will be the decision of the Said Pasha, won't it?' He smiled, dismissing me. 'Sleep well, my boy.'

Tired as I was, I knew I would not sleep at all that night. His night light, burning in his boudoir tent would keep me awake, though I would not be able to see it.

# IX

WE ALL HAD mounted at the same time as the Viceroy and after only half-an-hour's march across a dyke, we dismounted just outside a village because Said Pasha was indisposed and though unwilling to halt, was unable to continue.

We found an errant breeze beneath the shade of two immense sycamore trees. Vast green fields of corn in the blade stretched away almost to each horizon on every side.

The Viceroy was diagnosed to be suffering a nagging cold, with much hawking, spitting and sniffling. He kept wiping his leaking nose on the silk sleeve of his shirt. His eyes watered and he said his head ached with numbness and intense pressure.

'Rest in your carriage, Said,' De Lesseps urged him. One could see relief flood the dun brown face. And because the lionhearted had spoken, the curse was removed from the Viceroy's retiring to his mattressed carriage.

De Lesseps saw that everything was done to make Said Pasha comfortable. There was talk in the party that De Lesseps had been in Egypt during a plague when Said Pasha was only a young boy, and it was suggested that De Lesseps had saved the prince's life though no one could say in just what way, only that Said Pasha still felt deep indebtedness, and also felt comforted when De Lesseps was near during his illnesses, no matter how slight.

While De Lesseps was bustling about overseeing these preparations, an eagle hovered above us. It hung there in the sky like an angel of the gods, drifting with the wind, lazing, studying the pageant spread below him.

Zulfikar Pasha sent for his gun. And who else but Ferdinand De Lesseps was invited to blast the lovely

creature from the sky? One moment, the huge bird soared, sailed and poised there against faint nimbus and faded ceiling, majestic, like a valkyrie lost out of Valhalla, and then it was a blur of exploding feathers and it fell – almost at the feet of my horse, setting the animal to rearing.

'Hang on, boy,' De Lesseps called. 'You're all right. Skittish animal. That's all. It will settle down in a moment.'

Enraged, I bit my tongue to keep from speaking at all. I wanted to yell at him to go to hell. I had spent most of my life riding horses – those beautiful pure strains bred in England, and I was accustomed to every equine temperament. I certainly didn't need public condescension from the great father figure.

But he'd already forgotten me before I got my mount under control. Men crowded around De Lesseps, congratulating him upon his markmanship. Even the Said Pasha got out of his sick bed to bow before the gun handler in fawning admiration. De Lesseps accepted their accolades and effusive compliments with that quiet grace characteristic of the godly.

He then swung into the saddle for another demonstration of his superb horsemanship. He mounted the beautiful gift horse and announced that he would join Halim Pasha who had taken a shorter, though much rougher and more dangerous path for horsemen than the open route followed by the troops and vans and guns.

As he left the encampment, he paused beside where I sat astride my quieted horse. He gave me a faint, almost conspiratorial smile. He said, 'You and I know my shooting that eagle has little importance in the scheme of things in itself. But these people are most impressed by such displays of prowess.'

'I see they are.'

'Yes. Such a little thing as my ability with horse and gun may well influence public opinion in Egypt in favour of the success of our great project. Eh?'

And, nodding, he rode away before I could reply – even if I could have composed something civil to say. I sat there watching him, and his dust settled back over me and covered the mimosa bushes.

Of course, De Lesseps and Halim Pasha had been resting on the willow shaded banks of the Nile near Neguileh for some hours when we in the *khan* arrived, sweated, thirsty and saddle-sore.

The beautiful river coursed by as if flowing out of antiquity into eternity. There was a cool beauty about it, in this savaged, barren land that mystified and troubled one, and it was easy to believe the old saw that the Nile irresistibly attracted strangers who once drank of its waters. I knew better. Drinking of its waters was a quick way to catch *gyppie* stomach, which was a polite name for simultaneous gastritis and the runs.

The ten steamers Said Pasha had ordered, assembled along the quay, ready to take on our legions and equipage, a task which I saw as insurmountable, and because I did, I turned my back on it. Thank God, human labour was sand cheap and sand plentiful in lower Egypt.

A boat took our party, which included Said Pasha, out to his steamer, anchored in the channel. As we were piped aboard with band music, the first figure we saw at the head of the gangplank was Ferdinand De Lesseps. He awaited us, totally at ease and smiling in an almost proprietary way.

Said Pasha was even more child-like than usual in his anxiety to show his European guests the wonders of his steam yacht, which his hated predecessor, Abbas Pasha, had had built in England at a cost of £200,000.

I stared. Nothing had quite prepared me for such opulence, even in a sultan's world. There was luxury and comfort designed in every appointment, arrangement and furnishing. Doors of oak and citron wood, locks and hinges of solid silver, medallions, paintings of rivers and animals by internationally celebrated artists. We passed along staircases with silver balusters and railings, divans covered with cloth of gold, a saloon forty feet long, a dining room, boudoir, bedrooms, all furnished in the style of the grandest palace.

The boat was dazzling and I was dazzled. I had never encountered the likes of this lavish sea-going vessel; I knew it was unlikely any of us would see quite its equal again. And yet, I saw that De Lesseps moved through it all, as if bemused, his mind elsewhere.

'Are you bored?' I inquired.

He seemed to shake himself from some reverie. 'Of course not. It is all quite splendid.'

'One might think you encountered its like every other day on the Champs Elysées.'

He moved those thick shoulders in a shrug. 'One must remember, I was in Rome as Envoy Extraordinary.' Then he managed a faint smile. 'I am afraid my mind was – just a bit preoccupied.'

We had by now circled the ship and returned to the ice-cool saloon. Said Pasha clapped his hands for attention. But though all of us in the vast and glittering room gazed at him attentively, he spoke directly to De Lesseps. 'My dear friend, you will guess that I should not have been guilty of this folly.' He laughed and waved his arm. 'Nevertheless, I happily profit by it. *Aywa*?'

'Yes, your highness. Yes indeed.' De Lesseps nodded emphatically. Somehow, one had the impression that he had bestowed his blessing and it was now all right for the Viceroy to enjoy his expensive toy.

De Lesseps nodded his leonine head towards Ibrahim and his *sufragi* stepped forward bearing a long, neatly wrapped package in both arms and stood ceremoniously beside his august master.

'Your eternal highness,' De Lesseps said to Said Pasha in a voice quite loud enough for all aboard to hear, 'I wish to add my own small token of esteem in this day of great rejoicing.'

Said Pasha smiled, as full of anticipation as a child.

His entire entourage and even the people slightly removed along the decks fell silent in hushed expectancy. De Lesseps took the package from the puffed adder Ibrahim and pulled deliberately at its cords.

I watched him, incredulous. What sort of gift could he possibly dare to present to this fat little man who had everything – including a bad cold – in this moment of Said's unveiling his proudest new toy?

Again, I was stunned at the bravado, the aggressiveness, the sheer raw gall of this Frenchman! Here was Said Pasha,

in all his childlike pride, displaying one of the finest and most expensive of his possessions – and De Lesseps chose this moment to top him. My God, the audacity, the supreme ego, the blindness to everything except his own interests and his own goals.

Finally, when it seemed poor Said Pasha could restrain his naive eagerness no longer, De Lesseps was able to open the package – which any three-year-old could have ripped apart in three seconds flat at Christmas. He removed a cane of polished malaga wood.

But what a cane! I heard gasps of surprise, and I'm afraid one of those gasps was my own. The gold tip of that *bâton* glittered almost obscenely in the sunlight. 'Eighteen carats. Pure gold, your majesty,' De Lesseps said, without any false modesty. Then he twirled the stick in his fingers expertly and showed its head, a gleaming golden replica of the Sphinx. 'Also pure gold, highness. I hope it will serve you well and recall to you my love and esteem – and serve as well to mark this moment of our embarking upon our greatest adventure.'

As though he didn't own yachts and palaces and castles and harems teeming with the fairest females, Said Pasha accepted the walking stick, nodding and smiling. He tested its weight and smiled. He swung it around and around in his fist, and his smile widened. After a moment, he put his round little shoulders back and strutted up and down the red carpeted deck like some Parisian boulevardier. Everybody laughed and applauded politely.

I stood in shocked silence, realising that this was no spur-of-the-moment gift, found on a rack somewhere or in a native market place. De Lesseps had ordered this cane, and it must have been a long time earlier, months. My God, the thought struck me, he may have had it waiting for years in his absolute confidence, self-assurance and tenacity of purpose.

Said Pasha swaggered back to where his old friend stood. He nodded his gratitude. 'I'll walk nowhere without this cane from this day, my old friend,' he said. 'It will forever be as close as you are, my own right hand.'

'Thank you, your majesty,' De Lesseps said in what sounded like true humility.

But even the regent could not resist taunting his old friend

about De Lesseps' singleness of purpose, persistence and fanatical fervour in pursuing his goal. In his zealous, total preoccupation with his mission, he overwhelmed the Viceroy whose attention span was short and his interests widely diversified.

'I shall have one other use for this great *bâton* which can be seen from all directions and from everywhere. No matter what I wish to talk about, you, dear Fernando must discuss your plagued ditch in the sand. From now on, this shall not be. We shall discuss the canal only when *I* permit – when I thrust the stick high above my head – like this – ' and he lifted its gold head high, ' – then you may speak of your interest in the waterway project. When my cane is down – like this – ' and he gestured downward sharply to his side, ' – then, on the pain of *death*, there shall be no such discussions in my presence.'

Because he smiled so warmly, everyone laughed and applauded. Even De Lesseps had the grace to laugh at himself.

'Also, there is this sign,' Said Pasha said. 'I lift my gold headed cane and I wave it back and forth and this marks the greatest celebration of all time – our beginning what must be the greatest achievement in Egyptian history – one to pale even the accomplishments of the Pharaohs in comparison. One that will mark my reign apart from all others.'

They cheered until they were hoarse, their voices flying off across the water and echoing from the sands as Said Pasha kept waving the golden stick above his head.

There remained little I could accomplish or report on in Egypt. My mission had been abruptly terminated by De Lesseps' stunning victory.

I spent that afternoon in my stateroom aboard Said Pasha's luxury yacht composing my further – and final – report on this matter to Lord Stafford.

I offered him little to be optimistic about from the point of view of Her Majesty's government. I told him that De Lesseps' victory in winning the franchise – in perpetuity – to build a canal across the Suez was not a passing thing. That victory was the fruition of God alone knew how many years

of dedication, deep absorption, total devotion and attention to smallest details. While England minded affairs of a far-flung empire, De Lesseps had concentrated on his one obsession. He had minutely considered all angles, all options, all opposition, every possibility, and he had provided for each in his plans, and long in advance. I felt that the time had come for De Lesseps to start hiring people, surveying, drawing blueprints and doing all those things which would precede actual digging and construction. Any further action on the part of the British government was not within my limited jurisdiction. Respectfully, I awaited further instructions.

I returned that week to Alexandria and within three weeks orders arrived transferring me out of Egypt.

My own envy or suspicion or mistrust of De Lesseps – or whatever the complex emotion was – forces me to admit that I would like to be able to report that when De Lesseps felt he had no further use for me, no hope that I would intervene on his behalf in London, that he dropped me and shunned me and forgot my name.

Nothing could be further from the truth. When he heard that I had been transferred from the British Embassy in Alexandria, De Lesseps arranged a white-tie-and-tails dinner extravaganza in my honour at the French embassy. All Said Pasha's brothers whom I had met during my stay – Fuliker, Selim, Halim, Hafous – all of them – were present in all their finery along with Ruyssanaers and Clot Bey. These, besides French officials, were the dignitaries. But the night glowed with the diamonds and tiaras of European women, and the air was redolent with their exotic perfumes. And there seemed to be hundreds of unveiled Egyptian girls – some as lovely as ceramic dolls – to serve and entertain. French champagne flowed freely, everywhere – 'from the country around *Le Chenaie*,' De Lesseps informed me.

But nothing could drive the canal entirely from his mind. At the highest moments of the festivities, while everyone else was absorbed in drinking bubbling champagne, laughing at magicians or bear acts, or responding to the belly dancing of gorgeous Oulad Ali girls, De Lesseps clapped me fondly

about my shoulders and said, 'I shall miss you, my young friend. When I next see Empress Eugenie I shall remember you warmly to her. But I know I shall not be out of your heart or your mind, either. When you are spellbound – as the world shall be – by the first glory of our canal under construction, perhaps you will be finally inspired to preach to the British the need, the profit, the reward, the incredible boon to mankind that must – and shall – be opened out here in the desert. We'll win them over yet!'

I looked at him and grinned. 'Did I raise my walking stick high above my head?'

He frowned for a moment, faintly perplexed as most dedicated and obsessed people are by any hint of levity, then he realised I was heckling him about Said Pasha's rule on discussing the canal, and he smiled.

Then he laughed and put his head back laughing. And this was the memory of De Lesseps that I carried out of Egypt with me.

I shall not bore you with any personal accounts of my travels for the British foreign office, the ships I sailed, the bores I endured, the lands I visited, the dreams I dreamt, the girls I kissed.

I was not for some time again on the actual site of the canal, but I heard about its construction. The trick was not to learn of the progress being made by the French and Egyptians in Suez, one could not escape the deluge of information poured out of Cairo on the subject. I believed then, and still suspect, that De Lesseps must have hired scores of able newsmen to turn out copy favourable to his project, and yet professional and objective enough to intrigue editors around the world. Anyhow, they were intrigued.

From those newspaper accounts I learned, as an avid world did, how De Lesseps formed the 'Universal Company' – *La Compagnie du Canal Maritime de Suez Universal* – capitalised at 800 million pounds.

When an English representative asked the glowing Said Pasha how he expected the 'impossible job' could ever be accomplished, the Viceroy answered, smilingly, 'My dear

friend Fernando has entitled our company "Universal", all nations shall be invited to contribute to its capital. I myself have pledged my life and my fortune to this monumental achievement.'

To the same English agent, M De Lesseps announced the signing of the firman, 'I come as the friend of peace and of the Anglo-French alliance, to bring you that which will help to realise the saying, *Aperire terram, et dare pacem gentibus.*'

De Lesseps must have slept little all those months. He formed a commission of internationally renowned engineers to examine and report upon his own plan for the canal. Then, accepting their report, he stood obstinately against one of its strongest recommendations. In this position he was backed by only two engineers – Linant and Mougel, for once in agreement. He rejected all demands and proposals for locks anywhere along the length of the waterway.

'This canal shall be built at sea level from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea,' he was widely quoted as declaring.

And so it was begun.

Again, in the international press, he revealed the route widths at eighty metres, or 262 feet, and a depth of eight metres, or twenty-six feet three inches. His estimate for all this work was set at six and a half million pounds.

The whole length of the canal, from Port Said to Suez, was surveyed at eighty-eight geographical miles. Of this, sixty-six miles were actual dredged canal and twenty-two miles of the navigable waters were set through three lakes, Timsah and the Great and Little Bitter Lakes. The general slope of the excavation was set at two to one. Every five or six miles between Suez and Lake Timsah, a distance of about forty-two miles, 'gares' or sidings were built to allow large vessels to bring-up in, either for passing each other or mooring for the night.

The first great physical difficulty which the actual construction company encountered was the incredible amounts of silt deposits carried eastward from the Nile. These clotting coagulations rapidly formed shoals across the entrance to the canal at Port Said.

De Lesseps rushed to the rescue. At some extra, and unbudgeted cost, he ordered two formidable breakwaters thrown out on both sides of the canal, enclosing an area of 450 acres and extending as far as 7,000 feet into the sea on one side and 6,000 feet on the other.

He could do nothing wrong. Time proved his decision to have been correct, bold and perfect. These rip-rap breakwaters – loose blocks of artificial stone – formed a good, quiet and protected harbour.

He found the port of entry of easy access at Suez. A breakwater there protected the entrance from southerly winds.

De Lesseps was riding high. All his dreams and calculations and instincts were being proven infallible. Every decision he made justified itself and him. His opponents and detractors were shown to be wrong in every instance.

De Lesseps boasted to the world that construction progress was well ahead of schedule. With the blessing and co-operation of Mohammed Said he was using forced labour in the construction. Within a few years, far sooner than originally estimated, he told reporters, the sea lanes from Europe to the deepest Orient would be shortened more than 5,000 miles, a saving of thirty-six days from the old route around the Cape of Good Hope.

The gods who had been smiling and benign, suddenly frowned, or burst into savage, taunting laughter. De Lesseps was abruptly no longer their darling.

Expenses mounted alarmingly in the most unexpected areas. Though no excavation had been planned for the three lakes, Mougel found that in all cases, except for a length of about eight miles, it was necessary to excavate to obtain the required depth and a floor seventy-two feet wide.

Costs escalated and the cash flow slowed. Most of the early canal shares were bought by the French, small investors, by the Turks and by Said Pasha. When stock sales faltered, the Mohammed Pasha bolstered De Lesseps' company by continuing to buy shares until finally he owned nearly half the stock.

De Lesseps had reserved less than half the company shares

for sale to British, Russian, Austrian and American investors. But these reserved shares remained ignored and for years went unsold. Only Mohammed Pasha's faithful and continual infusions of capital and De Lesseps' own frantic sales efforts and personal pledges kept the project afloat at all. I must confess that it was acknowledged British policy to oppose sales of that stock whenever and wherever possible. Also, Lord Stafford used all his influence with the Sultan of Turkey to deny De Lesseps the franchise to build.

Then in January 1863, four years after actual construction began on the canal, Said Pasha became ill. He was confined to bed, attended by the finest medical men of Egypt and Europe, with dozens of nurses around the clock. He suffered torturous headaches which left him weeping and trembling. He burned with fever and lost almost eighty pounds to dysentery – ills which doctors insisted were residual effects from his youthful, and almost fatal, brush with the plague which had swept through Egypt in the thirties, almost decimating his nation.

In his delirium, Said Pasha called only one name. 'Fernando. Fernando. I want Fernando. Where is Fernando?'

At that time, De Lesseps was encamped on the banks of Lake Timsah, hundreds of miles south of the Viceroy's palace. With only Ibrahim at his side, De Lesseps chose to cross the desert on horseback rather than trust the railroad to Cairo. By the time he and Ibrahim arrived on January 19th, De Lesseps found that Said Pasha was already dead and laid to rest in a magnificent state funeral.

I was sent to Cairo as one of the representatives of the Queen, along with Lord Stafford, Lord Stoppard and others in the consular service.

It was the first time I'd seen De Lesseps since I'd departed Egypt nine years earlier, but he greeted me warmly, as if the time had been no more than a few weeks.

De Lesseps obtained permission to enter the family *gami* for a final farewell with his lifelong friend. He insisted that I accompany him. I had no stomach for the trek, but De Lesseps was as persuasive as usual and I went along with him into the mosque. I stood quietly in the shadows for an

hour while De Lesseps knelt in silence, his head resting on his dead friend's *turab*.

When we left the tomb, I thought that De Lesseps might discuss his deceased friend, but I found him instead, seething with rage. 'I had to get state permission to enter this mosque, and yet thieves have been allowed to enter and desecrate the place.'

Among those possessions which De Lesseps reported missing from the *gami* was the golden-headed walking stick which he had given to the Viceroy that day aboard the regent's fabulous yacht.

One of Said Pasha's brothers who was still in charge of security in the state until the investiture of the new Viceroy, deployed every available man of the national peace force searching for stolen artefacts. The next day he brought the walking stick as a gift to De Lesseps from the deceased regent. 'A pedlar stole it from the mosque during the burial ceremony,' Pasha said. 'I know that Mohammed Said would want you to have it. It meant so much to him as a gift from you.'

Said Pasha's brothers insisted that De Lesseps watch the penalty exacted from the thieving pedlar. De Lesseps tried in every polite way to decline, but all the brothers were insistent. The public trial on the street was brief and curt. The pedlar was charged, found guilty, and sentenced to lose both his hands.

De Lesseps interrupted the proceedings to make an impassioned plea for mercy towards the pedlar. Though he spoke movingly, the authorities simply accepted his pleading as routine, inconsequential and perfunctory.

As soon as De Lesseps finished speaking, the sentence pronounced against the pedlar was carried out. Four bailiffs grabbed him and held him prostrate on the stones of the street. De Lesseps' protests were ignored and the man's hands were lopped off at the wrists by the executioner.

Blood spewed and sprayed everywhere. Screaming, the pedlar writhed and bled profusely in the filth of the Cairo street. Sickened, De Lesseps walked away. I had already turned my back on the horror of the scene, the madness shining in the faces of the onlookers. Biting back the illness

gorging up into my throat, I followed the Vicomte.

We returned to his hotel and sat up most of the night, drinking gin and cognac between us, with De Lesseps talking on the one subject which obsessed him, the canal being carved across the Isthmus.

His face glowed, his dark eyes shone. The project had taken possession of him, his mind, body and soul. Considerations of the canal and its eventual fate affected his entire reasoning processes. He seemed unable to concentrate on anything else for very long – and such I've found to be the state of all driven men. At any rate, there was no room in his consciousness for anything except his grail, that beleaguered waterway.

He spoke to me in most reasonable tones and his complaints were entirely rational and listed without heat or passion. Continued British opposition, he said, against a project which must eventually profit the commonwealth perhaps above all other nations, since England was a maritime power with farflung interests of empire, was to him untenable and incredible. 'Surely, you must agree.'

Of course, as always, he did not wait for my reply, even if I had made one. He moved on to further woes. The canal had reached sand hills where the porous earth had to be removed by hand labour, men with baskets. There were many landslides; most engineers insisted the walls of the canal would never hold. 'These people hold that the canal will be choked by sand and that cost of maintenance would be prohibitive, causing the canal to be abandoned, even if it were finished.

'This is of course, completely false. We find remains of encampments of engineers at work in 1847, and we find evidence of canals dug across similar earth many centuries ago and still in use, we still find banks standing of the old canal of the Pharaohs and the Caliphs. During 1200 years torrential rains have certainly hollowed out gullies through these natural embankments, obliterating or even sweeping them away in places, but nowhere are they buried under the sands, or clotted by sand.

'But the obstacles flung in our way by the vagaries of nature do not match the obstructionism of human beings.

Turkey's Grand Vizier has interfered frequently, often in serious, even criminal and destructive ways – and always I see the British advisers standing behind him. No. At his shoulder. Prodding him. Is there no way we can convince your government of the rightness of our project? Can we make them see that French building of the canal is in no sense an act of hostility against Her Majesty's government? Must we be defeated then by our own allies? Can't they see how blind, how short-sighted they are being?'

'Obviously not,' was all I said.

He gave me a faint, almost conspiratorial, smile. We parted at one that morning with De Lesseps as open-heartedly and honestly convinced as ever that I secretly and yet whole-heartedly supported and endorsed him in everything he did.

I even tried at one juncture, when he paused to take a deep breath, to warn that the new Viceroy of Egypt could not be expected to be as easy to deal with as his old friend and pupil Mohammed Said had been.

'Ismail Pasha is a close friend of the British,' I told him. 'Educated in England. With many friends in high places there. He will not be as malleable as Said was.'

De Lesseps only laughed. 'Of course he will come around to the true view of the matter. He must. He will see the canal as Said saw it – as his contribution to Egyptian splendour, as his own ticket to immortality. God willing, I shall complete the canal during the reign of Ismail Pasha. He will see the fiscal profit, the chance to keep his name alive forever.' He sighed and smiled at me, with something like affection in the expressive face. 'Don't worry, my dear friend. I shall make Ismail Pasha see the truth.'

I wished him luck. One thing was clear. He was distressed by British opposition, but he had not lost his great driving enthusiasm. He feared no one. He believed no one, nothing, no gods could stop him. He was treading the edge of the precipice, it seemed to me, and yet he strode forward boldly, taking his giant steps. His canal moved towards the Red Sea, moved, as he said, from Suez to Pelusium and he marched towards true immortality and he would gladly carry with him all those souls astute enough and far-seeing enough to clamber aboard his caravan.

De Lesseps returned to his canal and I went back to my ever-changing consular posts across the empire.

I enter these personal notes here because in their small way they do have bearing on the canal and its tenacious and bedevilled builder.

In those next months, as I had in the past nine years, I went lightly across the world, wherever my assignments sent me. I came to realise that I was not dedicated to government and politics as say, a Disraeli was, nor did I have a date with destiny as De Lesseps was certain lay in store for him.

I relaxed and tried to enjoy my work as far as that was possible. I listened to tiny complaints against our great empire, and I smiled and attempted to right any wrongs where I could. I could not believe it, but glowing letters went back to the Home Office concerning me. It came to be that natives in many of the colonies would deal only with me. Lord Stafford even wrote that the government was proud of me and my achievements. I could count on rising high in the service. I could not take his letter seriously. My God! What achievements? I simply listened to people and talked with them and tried to soothe them when I could do no more for them. I felt that a little common sense in the execution of colonial affairs would not crumble the empire, nor very much affect the safety and continuity of Rule Britannia. After all, the empire was lasting and I was transient.

I was, as I have already related, on duty in Karachi when the summons came to return to Egypt, and I went to Ismailia to find the destruction of nature, the havoc wreaked by rainstorm and desert tornado and – as Oriana and others pointedly suggested – by explosive detonated under the cover of the avalanche and then placed by saboteurs in the pay of the British, or its agents. I could not believe this preposterous charge. I could not accept it. I would not allow it to go unchallenged. Her Majesty's government certainly opposed the canal across the Suez, but we were a civilised people, one of the most civilised nations on this earth, were we not?

*Part Three*

# ISTHMUS OF SUEZ, 1863-1867

# X

I DECAMPED FROM Ismailia as quickly after the saboteur attack as was acceptably possible. I tried to appear casual, normal, even nonchalant, and certainly in no way culpable. Good God, I wasn't guilty of anything. I didn't believe my government felonious either, and I refused to admit guilt simply because of my nationality. I did not believe the British stooped to terrorism in this year of 1863. I would not believe it. The very idea was repugnant and inwardly I was enraged, at the act and at the accusation, at the agents and the accusers.

Still, I was sensitive enough to know I prepared to depart in a clangorous silence of tensions. The atmosphere crackled about me, although everyone was most polite.

I even came to watch for secret fleeting smiles, or exchanged glances. I became nearly paranoid enough to suspect there were those French and Egyptians who believed I myself may well have placed that explosive in the path of the labourers.

I read hatred in the lovely dark eyes of Oriana Ducelle – when she permitted me to glimpse her eyes at all. She had begun smitten with all a young girl's ardour toward me; now she felt suspicion, mistrust and cold disregard. She avoided me whenever possible, even managing to take her meals at times when I was not in the dining room.

I accepted her turning against me as a most reasonable and fitting resolution of any inappropriate involvement between a seventeen-year-old girl and a 39-year-old British nomad. Still, I packed her image with me across that hot and silent desert. I felt empty and bereft when I thought back to her, which was more often than was rational. I experienced a sense of desolation when I faced the fact that I

would very likely never see her again. How could I miss her so terribly – a teenage girl of whose very existence I'd been blissfully and totally unaware just a few weeks earlier?

I tried to laugh at myself; this self-deprecating trait had always served me well in the past. Suddenly, I found I had, under pressures of suspicion, rejection, loss and inner rage, lost all vestiges of a saving sense of humour. I could manage only a bitter and twisted grimace of a smile.

The desert and the land of Egypt and the world itself and the long progression of void and untenanted days stretched out, sombre and melancholy, before me.

Arriving in Cairo, I went at once by public conveyance to the British Embassy, my inner rages seething close under the surface of my heated skin. The Negro coachman was skilled and experienced in driving at a brisk trot or even a gallop along the narrow streets and across the bazaars. It was like driving in a runaway carriage through Paris's Passage des Panoramas, off the Boulevard Montmartre. In spite of my orders to the contrary, the driver lashed out with his whip to make people in his path, leaning against the yellow walls or haggling in the open shops, get out of the way. The rabble did not complain; this was standard procedure. A few of them even stared at me in the tonneau of the vehicle and cried out, '*Machallah* – Glory be to God – here's a great lord passing!'

I winced at this cringing display of awe and reverence. But, by now, I'd been out here long enough to understand that this submissiveness was the way of life in the East, as it had been from time immemorial, and as it had been described in the Old Testament. After Joshua's massacre of the inhabitants of Jericho, including women, children and asses, the writer observes, 'So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame was noised throughout all the country.' Omnipotent Father! At least we hadn't killed anybody....

My mood was soured by the drive across town and my depression deepened as I arrived, galloping, at the British Embassy where Lord Stratford de Redcliffe kept me cooling my heels for thirty minutes in an antechamber. Remembering how I had waited at Aden to see Lord

Stoppard, I decided thirty minutes was standard among nobility. One who waited thirty minutes for an audience had to be impressed by the noble's position, authority and pressures.

It did not improve my disposition to find Lord Stratford was not alone when finally he received me in his plush and ornate office. With him was my old friend Lord Stoppard, from Aden, as well as Mr Bruce, the Agent and Consul-General for England.

They smiled at me warmly, motioned me into a deep, leather covered chair, and served gin and bitters. But I found that Lord Stoppard was in the middle of a story about elephant hunting and did not intend to relinquish the floor.

I sank back in my chair, drawing a deep breath and holding it to keep from yelling at them, so taut-drawn was I.

Stoppard, as he told it, had accompanied a party of elephant hunters up the Nile within two degrees of the Equator. There natives informed them that the river was navigable for another four degrees below the Equator, but that it would take a month to travel it, on account of the winding course of the river, a total of some 150 leagues.

'In those lofty regions on either side of the Nile up there are vast forests,' Lord Stoppard said, nodding his head, savouring the memory. 'Those almost impenetrable wilds are inhabited by elephants, lions, great apes, all sorts of animals... Sometimes, I tell you, our party fired upon the herds of hundreds of elephants. These huge pachyderms simply lumbered rapidly along ahead of us as we shot at them. They never even looked behind them. They took no more notice of our bullets than if we'd been pelting them with sugar plums, by Jove. They didn't even quicken their pace after the discharges. Incredible. Incredible. Such monstrous beasts. A strange land. Fantastic. Wouldn't have missed it for anything, you know. I mean, even despite all the discomfort and hardships.

'I tell you, on one occasion our party finally entirely surrounded one big bull elephant. Dashing, trumpeting, up to one of our gun bearers, he lifted the man with his trunk. Jove! Actually tossed him in the air and dashed him to the ground. Terrible. Terrible. But at close quarters our volleys

of rifle fire were too much for him. The bullets finally stunned, dropped and slew him at last. God knows how many times the great beast was hit. Exciting. Exciting....'

Lord Stratford chose this moment to include me in their conversation. He gave me a warm smile. 'I hear you have been in the midst of excitement yourself, Tony? Eh? Eh?'

I was reluctant to discuss a sensitive matter such as sabotage in an open parley, but I wanted the matter in the open. I would relate the charge against our foreign service; it would be denied and laid to rest, and that was what I wanted. I glanced at each of the three men, the business-like Bruce, the bumbling Stoppard, the supercilious Stratford de Redcliffe watching me through a glittering opaque monacle.

'More excitement than I bargained on. When I arrived after the storm, I found incredible damage – some of which the engineers insisted came from man-made explosives. I couldn't believe that, and found no evidence to support the charges – nature herself had wreaked an incredible havoc out there.... But this last thing – that was sabotage.'

Lord Stratford nodded. 'I hear it may well be the *coup de grâce*. Eh? Mohammed Ismail has refused to permit De Lesseps to use forced labour on the project any longer. The Egyptian National Exchequer has been almost drained by Mohammed Said's impulsive investments in the canal company. The country is on the verge of bankruptcy. Now, with threats of violence and death, De Lesseps won't be able to force even well-paid labourers into the pits, will he? Even if he had the money to pay them.'

I said, 'I suppose sabotage on a huge project like that is to be expected – '

'Oh, absolutely,' Stoppard said. He laughed and cleared his throat. 'There are fundamentalist Islams who oppose the whole business for fanatical religious reasons. We cannot expect them not to act – '

'But we cannot expect that a great nation would finance and support their terrorist activities, either,' I said.

I saw them exchange glances. I saw the faint warmth in Lord Stratford de Redcliffe's face wane. They sat watching me, but let Stoppard reply, as if somehow, since he'd

briefed me at Aden, I was his responsibility, and he should be allowed to 'handle' me.

'What sort of charge are you making, Tony?' Stoppard inquired.

'It's not a charge I am making at all,' I said. 'It is a charge being made on the site at Ismailia – by French and Egyptians. It is the kind of charge that will get sensational coverage in the press all over the world. It will heighten the tensions between France and England – tensions which are already drawn fine. It is a charge which must be publicly and internationally denied and repudiated. There is no other way.'

Lord Stoppard laughed. 'Oh, there must be *some* other way. Eh? Eh?' He glanced toward the others through the gray haze of cigar smoke and smiled again.

'I know of no other,' I said. 'Tension between allies is one thing; it cannot be excised altogether. The very nature of nationalistic view takes care of that. But sabotage... sabotage of one ally against the other is to my mind unthinkable and indefensible. If we cannot trust one another, what in God's name is to become of us in the alien community of nations?'

Lord Stoppard rocked back and forth for a moment in his deep chair, regarding me as if I were a backward third former. 'Have you spent all these years in foreign service, Hamilton, and remained unaware of the sophisticated undercover operations of security agencies? Why, you must know that we could not exist without them.'

'But are we talking about subversion against inimical powers here?' I said, 'I don't think so. I admit there is strong political antagonism between England and the Second Empire. I know that. I know that the construction of this canal across the Suez has deepened all other tensions. I understand – and fully endorse – our government's opposition to French expansionism out here. We do hold advantages, material and political, in our commerce in Oriental seas over the countries on the Mediterranean. We now monopolise half the general commerce with India and China. We possess an immense empire in Asia which might be endangered if a waterway to the Mediterranean were

opened. I know all this, and I understand it. I'm sure my position is perfectly clear.'

'Of course it is, my dear boy,' Lord Stoppard said. 'But I remind you your missions have never been the *solution* of any of the many questions of British mid-East policy, of which the Suez Canal matter is only one... No. No, my boy. That policy making – and action taking – decision is made by secret security council, at the very highest level of government, policy not to be questioned by any of us.'

I stared at him. 'Are you saying our government *could* be behind actual sabotage operations in the Suez?'

'I'm not saying that. What I am saying is that if our high privy councils do order such clandestine actions, I for one shall never question them. God knows, I shan't even *discuss* them. Nor should you.'

'My God,' I said. 'But this is criminal. Somebody must protest.'

'Why?' Now Mr Bruce leaned forward, his gin sloshing in his glass, loud in the silent chamber. 'We want this thing – this canal – stopped. Abandoned. For the good of all nations. For the profit of Great Britain. Are we not all in agreement about that?'

'But, sir,' I said. 'Can there be no limits set on the options open to this opposition?'

'Not by us,' Lord Stoppard said in a smug voice.

'Not by any of us,' Lord Stratford de Redcliffe agreed.

Mr Bruce smiled at me. 'Let's put aside the consideration of international ethics and morality for the moment. Let's make this matter more personal... I know of no young man in foreign service as well-regarded to this moment as you, Hamilton.'

'Hear, hear,' Lord Stoppard said.

I sat, hardly breathing, waiting.

Bruce said no more. He was not one to flog a dead horse, nor break a butterfly on the wheel. But Lord Stoppard bent forward. 'Don't involve yourself in matters you can't change, Hamilton. Where you can be hurt personally. Please don't. If you officially protest this matter – and I am sure all of us in this room agree none of this discussion shall go beyond these walls – '

'Certainly not,' Lord Stratford de Redcliffe said.

Bruce nodded.

Lord Stoppard exhaled heavily, his jowls quivering. 'The thing is, Hamilton, if you oppose – or even question those men in the security council, it can only destroy you and your career. You'll find yourself passed over, without a word of complaint or explanation. Withering on the vine. Sweating in farthest empire outposts, forgotten and ignored. You don't want that to happen. We don't want it to happen.'

'I can assure you, if our security people are in any way involved – stealthily – in this matter,' Bruce said, 'it is at a covert and remote site, so removed from the actual violence that no proof could ever be brought against them... Mind you, I don't say we are involved at all, in any way. I don't know if we are. I only say – any involvement is at such a removed posture that no actual guilt such as you suggest could ever be assessed.'

'These are good and noble men. These men have our empire's best interests at heart,' de Redcliffe said. 'They consider well and long any step they take.'

I exhaled heavily. 'But do they? I believe it is the rigid thinking at such levels which continually court disaster for all of us – and for the empire... Men who react to any threat from their guts and not their heads, who reply to any threat with bombs, guns and warships. Hasn't civilisation progressed beyond such visceral responses? Isn't it time we conferred – even with our enemies? Talked to them? Listened to them? Tried to understand them instead of destroying them first and discussing later? Isn't even compromise better than bloody devastation?'

Lord Stratford de Redcliffe laughed. 'Good lord, Hamilton. You begin to sound like the Jew Disraeli. I believe the men charged with the defence and counter-intelligence of our country to be able, goodhearted, brilliant men.'

I nodded. 'I'm sure they are. Individually. Personally, I'm sure they all eat mutton and kidney stew and suffer heartburn... I'm only asking if it isn't easier for them to send out a dozen battleships and blow an enemy to hell than to think a little – to look ahead – to learn from mistakes – to give human decency a chance?'

Lord Stoppard spoke in a cold, sharp tone. 'I don't know much about human decency at the international level... You must stop this kind of talk at once, Hamilton. It is downright subversive. Downright. Intolerable for a man in your position. I'm astonished at you. It is one thing for us to discuss – philosophically – England's posture toward the wolves surrounding her, but, sir, it is quite another to question the integrity and intelligence of the men charged with that thankless business.'

'And again,' Bruce said in a mild tone, 'It won't do *you* any good. You have too brilliant a future to jeopardise it over a matter that is quite out of our hands. Quite.'

My voice shook. 'I cannot smile in a man's face while our paid covert agents sneak up behind him and place a fragment bomb in his pocket.'

Lord Stratford de Redcliffe laughed. 'Why not? We all of us do it, every day, Hamilton... Come, put it from your mind. There was an explosion of unknown origin at the site of the French project in the Suez. Turkey, Moslems, God only knows who might be behind it. It is a question we cannot answer for you – '

'And would not,' Stoppard added.

'We in foreign service walk a tight rope. We must trust our superiors and their judgements. Or we must walk away from the foreign service. There is no alternative. We get our orders, Hamilton. We carry them out. The Empire flourishes under this system. I cannot fault it. Can you? That the Empire survives – that's what's really important isn't it?' Bruce nodded. 'That – and the security and advancement of our own careers. Eh? Eh?'

'We are pleased you came in today, Hamilton,' Lord Stratford nodded and a servant replenished my gin and bitters. 'We were talking about you. We have a mission of great delicacy which we believe you better than anyone else can carry out for Her Majesty.'

'I don't place time bombs,' I said.

'Irony has no place in diplomatic circles, dear boy,' de Redcliffe said.

'As you may know, Hamilton,' Bruce said. 'For some time now Mr Murray has been trying to gain the confidence

of Mohammed Ismail. He has failed utterly. Mohammed Said refused to entertain Murray at all and now Murray has been unable even to arrange an audience with the new Viceroy.'

'Murray?' I said, overcome with a sense of nightmare. 'Isn't he the Murray who was Consul General in Egypt during the reign of Abbas Pasha?'

'That's right,' Bruce nodded. 'Now Murray is Minister in Persia.'

'Let him stay there,' I said. 'His was the most blatant example of the old outmoded policy of antagonism and jealous rivalry between France and England here in Egypt. His prejudices became almost British policy. He practically made Cairo his battleground. He used every cheap lie, covert activity and trick known to alienate the Egyptians from the French.'

Lord Stoppard nodded. 'Murray was carrying out British policy, Hamilton, as you damn well know.'

'And that policy has not changed out here,' de Redcliffe said. 'It has, if anything, solidified.'

'How could it?' I said. 'It was Murray who used all his influence with Abbas Pasha to drive Said Pasha from Egypt in disgrace. I would suggest that much of the evil heaped on Said Pasha by his uncle germinated in Mr Murray's fertile mind.'

Bruce laughed. 'Of course. You may be sure of it. The home office is proud of Murray. Delighted with him. One knew where Murray stood.'

'Murray never *stood* anywhere,' I said with some venom. 'He crept – on his belly. And when Abbas Pasha was assassinated, Murray was one of the first British nationals to be spirited out of Egypt... Are you suggesting you want to bring him back to Cairo?'

'Said Pasha is dead,' Stoppard said. 'But British policy in the Mid-East persists. Mohammed Ismail is a different bird from Said. We believe we can get within his good graces, and influence him – given the opportunity.'

'You mean Murray?' I said, incredulous.

Lord Stratford de Redcliffe nodded. 'All we want you to do, Hamilton, is to intervene on Murray's behalf – '

'I am not that close with Ismail Pasha,' I protested.

'No. No. We want you to return to see Vicomte De Lesseps on this matter,' Bruce said. 'That's all.'

'All? I believe I'd as soon set a personnel bomb.'

'That's all we want,' Bruce continued, imperturbable. 'De Lesseps trusts you. As he trusts me. I have already told him that as long as there was no question of the intervention or influence of any one Power in Egypt, but merely the free combination of capital authorised by the Viceroy of Egypt, I could not foresee any opposition to the canal on the part of England. He accepted my word. He trusted me. But he is far friendlier toward you. I think if you could convey to him that these are the sentiments – no opposition to his project – of Mr Murray and that Murray wishes only to gain the ear and confidence of Ismail Pasha on unrelated matters, De Lesseps might well act as mediator. He knows it would please us. And De Lesseps loves to play god, eh? We all know that.'

'Are you suggesting that De Lesseps is stupid enough to believe Murray has changed his spots?'

'It's your job to convince him,' Stoppard said.

I stared at each of them, separately and individually. They merely gazed back at me blandly. 'If there is any way for me to refuse this assignment,' I said, 'I would like now to avail myself of it.'

'I don't see any such option open to you,' de Redcliffe said. 'We need you – and your intimate relationship with Vicomte De Lesseps. Our government badly wants Murray back in a place of intimate exchange with the new Viceroy. It's that simple.'

'It's not that simple at all,' I said. 'First, I am not joking when I tell you many intelligent men on De Lesseps' staff – perhaps including De Lesseps himself – hold English money, at least, responsible for this latest destruction at Ismailia. De Lesseps well knows that Murray was behind Abbas Pasha's cruel treatment of Said Pasha. Now, you want me to ask De Lesseps to use his great influence with Ismail Pasha in order to get Murray close enough to Said Pasha's successor to alienate the Viceroy from De Lesseps himself. You ask too much.'

'Murray's mission to Ismail Pasha is vital to British interests out here, Hamilton. If he does nothing more than remind the new Viceroy that perhaps Ismail's predecessors moved in too much of a hurry in the Suez Canal affair, he plants those seeds of doubt which have legitimacy and which may well be harvested by further British intelligence.'

'I'm beginning to doubt British intelligence,' I said.

Lord Stoppard laughed. 'You're joking, of course. We all wish the best for you, Hamilton. We also hope that you won't destroy all the good that has accrued to your name – the chance for rapid and high advancement – on account of some misguided prejudices and false accusations against your own country.'

'Think first of your own career, Hamilton,' Bruce said. 'That's my friendliest advice to you, my boy.'

# XI

I SUDDENLY WANTED a drink. Badly. And not the tasteless liquid I was consuming here in the Embassy. I wanted to get out of this polite abattoir, this unctuous parlour where clandestine operations were never created, only carried out unquestioningly. I cannot pretend to have been unaware of the covert activities of my government. I was well aware of its eternal vigil against its enemies, foreign and domestic, as they liked to say in the House of Commons. It was only that this malfeasance at Ismailia was my first encounter with subversion – if indeed this were true – against a close ally. And perhaps too even in that sombre chamber, I was thinking about Oriana Ducelle in the warmer preserves of my mind. I didn't want her to believe that my own countrymen would stoop to terrorist activity against her canal and her god De Lesseps. Oriana and I had obstacles aplenty between us – age, nationality, opposing goals – without adding criminality. I wanted her – for her own sake – to put me out of her heart, but not in cold hatred. And more, I had heard enough of the restrained, subdued and oleaginous threats of three of my superiors – three chillingly smiling men who represented the hundreds and thousands of the patriotic establishment and especially the bureaucratic hierarchy. I wanted to get away from them. At the moment I wanted to get away from the entire foreign service. Most of all, I wanted to escape myself, my own self-hatred, my own agonised thoughts. I knew better. I could not do this. The best I could do was to quit this place.

So I left.

It was dark when I came out onto the boulevard Kornish El Nil along the dark river. Only a few women were abroad

at this hour, most of them clad in the traditional chador, some with their faces veiled or concealed. Graceful minarets of aged mosques reared, delicately illumined, along the skyline. The parks were places of shadows and the flowering gardens along the wide boulevard looked tired and sere after a long and sweltering day. Cairo's nine million people rested, out of sight, most of them, its commerce in economics, in politics, administration, culture, education, entertainment, military and history, paused, as if drawing a deep breath in the early evening. The silence was laden with scents of spices and incense. Wind rattled fronds on tall, skinny palms. The faint lights and clotted buildings seemed to stretch into infinity along both banks of the Nile. On the waterway a few people lazed along, talking in subdued tones, in the commercial feluccas.

Without knowing consciously why I chose one direction over another, I walked south toward Garden City and the palatial residential area, with Old Cairo and the isle of Roda beyond. To the east the Citadel glowed brilliantly with light, commanding the city from the foot of the Mukattan hills. I didn't truly walk very far along El Qasar Al Eini. I went only to the nearest alley where I'd learned I could buy liquor. I knew only one way to escape myself: on gin and bitters.

I don't remember too much of what went on around me in this smoky saloon frequented mostly by Europeans, or by those students from Asia and outer Africa who had been attracted to Cairo by Al Azhar, the oldest continuous university known to history.

I drank, but I escaped nothing. I saw those dark-eyed women with their coffee-brown faces concealed as if I looked into reflections of the past. Females behind veils, as human greed and human inhumanity masquerade behind smiling masks of patriotism. Masks I wore better than anyone else, because I didn't even question where the masks came from. I saw myself behind those masks – the mask of my smiling face at Ismailia, at the very site of nightmarish incendiary destruction. My mask could not conceal from me what I was inside. I saw myself in liquored clarity as I truly was, my guilt, my evil, my deception, my unatoned wrongs.

I could no longer deny the old axiom that wheeled and whirled inside my gin-addled brain: withholding the truth is its own brand of lying.

I had not been certain the British were involved or responsible, even at Lord Stoppard's 'remote stance', for the explosives set by saboteurs. Now I was less than certain of anything except that it was a pleasant night at last and that I almost enjoyed my alcoholic glow, sitting by myself, drinking too fast and far too much, but not effectively enough. I still remembered my name.

I still remembered Oriana. Whether I wanted her to or not, she materialised in the swirls of *kif* smoke hanging redolent in the room, I was stunned with loneliness, even when this made no sense at all. My road ahead lay clearly away from her, and I'd damned well better get her out of my mind one way or another.

Someone once said, 'I never knew loneliness until I first met love.' I had no idea who'd said it, but I knew now truly what he meant. I found myself seeing how heated and satisfying and thrilling it would be to kiss that gentle and virginal mouth, to open the buttons of her waist to kiss and suckle and fondle her lovely, fresh young breasts. In my thoughts I saw her plainly and she calmly and solemnly waited for what I would do next. There was so much I wanted to do, so much I could never do. I ordered more liquor and I drank it and was miserable in the pleasantly glowing night. I suppose the unhappiest man of all loves and is not loved in return.

When my glass stood empty, I ordered larger quantities, but behind my eyes, in the region of pain, I remained coldly sober, and alone and discontented. I tried not to think about tomorrow and the decision I had to make. Bruce had put my dilemma into words: 'We in foreign service walk a tight rope. We must trust our superiors and their judgements. Or we must walk away from the foreign service. There is no alternative.'

I stared into my glass, trying to find answers in it. Did I trust my superiors any more? What option did I have then but to join them in their conspiracy against De Lesseps, or to walk away from my career when it had begun its upward mobility?

I could walk away, or I could follow orders, keep my mouth shut, return to Ismailia and pretend to believe that De Lesseps was stupid enough to accept Murray – whom he had good reason for hating – and not only accept him but to intercede for him with Mohammed Ismail. This was the only way I could hang on to what I had built. If I did this, in the long run I was certain its results would be fatal to De Lesseps' canal – almost as destructive as dynamite detonated by thugs.

How could I live with myself if I were knowingly party to such deception? And how could I ever hope to go near Oriana again? How could I ever face those undeceived eyes? I knew the answer to this, at least.

I could not.

'Well, here you are,' said a voice at my shoulder.

Reluctantly, I turned. It was British Consul-General Bruce. He smiled cordially, a brow slightly tilted. 'Oh, hello,' I said. 'Mr Bruce. Will you have a drink?'

'I've been looking for you.'

'Knew just where to find me, eh?'

'Let's say I recognised the mood.'

'Are you sure you won't have a drink? And any part of my mood you'd care to share.'

He smiled. 'A drink? I'm afraid I could never catch up with you.'

I nodded, grinning. 'Even if you took the low road, I'll be in Nirvana before you.'

'Is that where you think you are going?'

'I'm very carefully observing all the signposts. It's where I'm going all right.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'I'm not sure of anything.'

'It's an occupational disease. Once you've contracted it and overcome it, you are well on your way to a full recovery. This disease is one we must fight where we find it – in the trenches, in the hedgerows, on the beachheads.'

'Are you sure you aren't drunk, and I sober?'

'I'm pretty sure. I'm only trying to say that whatever roads you've been down, I've been down at least twice as many.'

'I guess it's not the road so much as how rough you find the going.'

'We're ambitious for you in the service.'

'Ambition is all right if you know where to stop.'

He shook his graying head. 'Unfortunately, you can't stop. You can only slip backward or fall off the trolley.'

'I was thinking about jumping off the trolley.'

'I was sure you were.'

I sighed out heavily and twisted the glass in my fingers. 'I was never meant to be a covert spy – even in sheep's clothing.'

'I know. You find yourself between hawk and buzzard.'

'My mother wanted me to be a doctor.'

'All mothers want all of us to be doctors. But we find ourselves in slots we never meant to fall into, yet where we fit quite well. Perhaps there is reason behind all this. Have you ever given a thought to that?'

'Never until this moment.'

'And what do you think?'

'That I'd like to vomit.'

'Perhaps it's best if you do. A hang-over tomorrow morning. A big head. Deep depression and then realisation. You are only asked to do your job. I know you believe it is England against the civilised world in the matter of this ditch across the Suez.'

'I had begun to suspect that.'

'Well, don't. I can tell you that not even De Lesseps' most devoted disciples fully endorse that project any more. I may be wasting my breath, but I should like to retail to you a heartbreaking scene I myself witnessed before Said Pasha died. You'll agree that none was more dedicated to De Lesseps and his ditch than the late Viceroy?'

Scowling, I watched his face.

Bruce said, 'I'd been invited to the Citadel for a private audience with Said Pasha. I bowed toward the large divan, the very room where his father, Mehemit Ali had often received me and where one day he had described to me his tragedy of the massacre of the Mamelukes.

'Hearing the sound of sobbing coming from the Viceroy's boudoir, I hesitated at the great door which stood ajar for

me. The corridor with its arched windows and light slanting in through abatjours lay silent in a crosshatching of sunlight.

'I touched the knob. By now, it seemed my long friendship with Said Pasha gave me the right to presume in a moment of his distress. Still, he was the Viceroy of Egypt – a supreme ruler, even though I happened to know he was a bankrupt one.

'Letting caution dictate, I rapped on the door facing and repeated this until a stricken, choked voice answered. 'Who is it?' The tone was petulant and aggrieved. 'I told you, I want to see no one.'

'It is I, your highness. Claude Bruce. Are you all right?'

' "Yes. I'm all right." He fell to weeping again. I took this display of helpless emotions as invitation to intrude upon his person.

'I opened the fifteen foot high door, closed it behind me and stood, stunned. Said Pasha, regent of Egypt, crouched on his knees like a child, clutching a silken pillow in his arms and sobbing into it.

'I crossed the parquet flooring and knelt beside him. "Your highness. My dear friend. Said. What is it? What's the matter?"

' "*Fernsi,*" he whispered.

' "What?" I asked before I remembered this was his yacht, the *Turquoise*. His pride was that extravagant yacht which his uncle Abbas Pasha had had custom-built in England in a reckless display of fiscal immaturity and bad taste. "What about your yacht?"

' "My beautiful yacht." The Viceroy hugged himself, weeping. "I could never have spent money in that way, but the *Turquoise* was beautiful. It was beautiful."

' "It was?" I said. "What happened?"

' "It is gone," he sobbed. "My beautiful boat – it has gone down – down his – his goddam ditch."

'I stared at him shocked, enchanted. I knew this to be a truly historic moment, perhaps unparalleled in history. I was being permitted to witness a moment of truth beyond comprehension. I was looking at the helpless Viceroy, caught in a holy crusade which he despised but from which

he could not escape. He had sunk into that shattered ditch his fortune, his honour, his credibility, and now the last and most adored of his bright and golden treasures.

'I stood there, knowing we yet could win. I had believed there were *two* men dedicated, devoted and consecrated to opening that canal across the Isthmus of Suez. I had believed myself opposed by the merged dreams of two fanatical men blind to everything else.

'In the name of Allah. There was only De Lesseps. He alone clutched that vision, that dream, that madness, that obsession. Only because he had the strength of ten men had he been able to first persuade a weak and vascillating Viceroy to join him, and only by exercise of indomitable will had he been able to keep Said Pasha under his thumb.

'Standing there, I even wondered if perhaps De Lesseps had known this all along.

'But looking at the weeping Viceroy on the floor, I did not have to ask.'

Bruce stopped talking and for a moment we sat there in a brittle silence. At last I breathed as if I had forgotten how. 'Oh my God,' I said.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't feel better. I feel more lost than ever.'

He smiled. 'You're not lost at all, my boy. You're simply finding yourself at last.'

I awoke the next morning with Oriana's name on my dehydrated lips, a film across my painful eyes, an intolerable thirst and the pound of sledge hammers in my temples.

I opened my eyes and sunlight through a skylight lanced viciously into them. I held my breath and gripped my mattress until the distress eased and the world stopped spinning. Nothing was clear in my mind, not even how I'd reached this hotel and my bed. But my brain was clear about one thing: I was going back to Ismailia.

I couldn't say why precisely. I certainly didn't see things more clearly than before – I was, if anything – more confused than ever. I simply saw it all differently, hungover, in liquored lucidity, in loneliness and even self-hatred. I saw

the obsessed, arrogant Lion of the Suez, devouring all around him in order to satisfy his own obsessed hungers. I saw my government's futile opposition to him, I remembered the look of defeat in the time-ravaged face of Louis Napoleon III, his own monarch. And I kept seeing Said Pasha as he must have looked, weeping upon his polished flooring, bankrupted by following De Lesseps' path. I saw the terror in the faces of labourers forced to risk death by dynamite at any step forward along the line of De Lesseps' accursed ditch. I saw the wide gulf between De Lesseps and myself. But in all honesty, most of all, I saw Oriana – and I knew where she was, and that was where I wanted to be.

I was going back to Ismailia....

At ten o'clock that morning, freshly bathed, shaved, polished and pressed, I presented myself, *solar topee* in hand, at the office of the British Consul-General.

Mr Bruce received me at once, as if he had been awaiting me, expecting me. It was as if he were more certain of the road I must follow than I ever was.

Lord Stratford de Redcliffe was with the Consul-General. To look at them, one would have thought yesterday and last night were only bad dreams and had never actually happened at all. What's the old saying? They looked as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.

I gave them my report on the violence at Ismailia without comment, and they quietly accepted it as if they had never heard it before. Here I was, playing the hypocritical game I despised above all others. But my career, my chances for advancement, perhaps my job, hung in the balance and I decided to play it their way.

'There is every reason for increased optimism that De Lesseps can be finally stopped, before he has gone too far,' de Redcliffe said. 'The House of Rothschild in their Paris offices, demanded fees and interest which seemed exorbitant to De Lesseps. He refused angrily to deal with the financial house at all and they say Lionel Meyer wished him good hunting elsewhere in the money market and curtly closed the interview. And now we have news that Arles Dufore, once De Lesseps' strongest supporter in Paris, now wavers,

ready to withdraw all support. As we've discussed here, the Egyptian Treasury has been almost depleted by this reckless fiscal adventuring. I believe we British can convince the Grand Vizier in Constantinople to delay any approvals of capital or credit, or further rights required to complete the canal. We have convinced the Supreme Porte that Viceroy Said Pasha moved too hastily and that he ought to go slowly, seek outside advice.' Lord Stratford smiled faintly and touched at his moustache with the back of his index finger. 'Ours... This latest destruction by sabotage out there ought to just about finish De Lesseps.'

I could not explain to you the sense of emptiness that struck me in the belly. I couldn't even explain it to myself.

Consul-General Bruce was watching me oddly. 'You've been closer to De Lesseps than almost any other British national has been permitted, Hamilton. What have you seen? What weaknesses are intensified, now that a new Viceroy has come to power?'

'My God,' I said, exhaling. 'Almost all of them. One sees now nothing but weaknesses, which he refuses to admit. But I see as the greatest threat to him the Moslem religion.'

'Religion?'

Brows tilted, they stared at me. I told Bruce how the Shiite priest had spoken in vehement passion and fanaticism against De Lesseps and all his works, in the presence of De Lesseps himself.

I drew a deep breath, held it. I didn't like this game yet, I liked myself even less. 'Religion might be your best attack... I believe that without any further violence, you could cause the people of Egypt – at least great numbers of the Shiites and other fundamentalist Muslems to speak and work and strike in opposition to the canal. The Shiites seem to have more influence with Mohammed Ismail than they had with Said Pasha, to whom religion was something he observed with fingers crossed.'

Bruce stared at me in shocked delight. He found it hard to believe I had submitted so totally and so abruptly to the demands of the establishment. I could have told him I was a rebel without spine. He nodded, pleased. 'And you say without violence?'

'I hope no violence,' I said. 'Not if *we* are working with them. There has been enough killing out there.'

'My dear boy, there is nothing to connect our government with such operations,' de Redcliffe said.

I shrugged. We had chased that one around the mulberry bush. Bruce spoke in a soft, level tone.

'Let's not rule out violence entirely. I say if we can somehow stir Islamic fanatics or even religious terrorists against the workers and the canal itself, it must be regarded as a major achievement in British policy.' He gave me his warmest oleaginous smile. 'I shall certainly see, Tony, that the Home Office is apprised of your part in the formation of this excellent suggestion.'

'Oh, absolutely,' de Redcliffe agreed.

I shook my head. 'I think if you hope to rouse any of these religious sects to violence you expect too much. To date there is no precedent of their violence against authority – perhaps someday. There is no way to move Shiites – even the most fundamentalist – to attack their rulers. Their Viceroy is sacred to them... if anything, this ruler-worship is part of Egyptian culture.'

'Perhaps it is now time we subjected their old ways to modern pressures,' de Redcliffe suggested. He laughed and shrugged. 'Anyhow, to serve our purposes, violence from the religious area would prove effective – perhaps if they only *looked* like Arabs.'

Bruce laughed too. 'Religious Arabs.'

De Redcliffe nodded, touched at his moustache. 'Of course. Oh, of course.'

I suppose while I was still fighting out the conflicts that raged inside me, I made my unalterable decision – the only one possible to me – to stay in the service and to follow orders, obediently if not enthusiastically. I was British. I was a career man in the service. I did believe British opposition to the Suez canal both reasonable and persuasive. But, again, most of all, I was persuaded by the fact that in accepting the inevitable – the conditions and demands of the Home Office – I was going back to Ismailia. I was going to see Oriana again, be near her, breathe the

sweet, haunting scent of her, feel those electric charges which bristled in the atmosphere between us and froze reason in mid-air. I wanted to see her. She was still a teenaged child, just budding out of girlhood, protected and naive, and I was a middle-aged rover. I had nothing to offer her but a nomad's empty, rootless existence. It was all wholly inappropriate in our present society. But, even as I thought this, I was saying *To hell with that,* I wanted to see her again. I missed her. I missed her as I had not believed I could miss another human being. For twenty years I had trained myself never to react in this way to anyone. Even when I excised her from my mind, she remained in my heart.

Our small caravan of two dromedary camels, two asses as baggage bearers, and my own horse, moved eastward with what seemed to me interminable slowness. At the last, we followed the freshly cut sweetwater canal from the Nile to Ismailia – the fresh water on which depended the success of the whole project.

From an eminence of sand hills, we looked down on the construction site. I was shocked to find several new dredges, winches, shovels, steam ploughs, digging equipment which I knew to have been destroyed.

I sat, stunned; it was like looking at a miracle in the desert. I knew De Lesseps had somehow accomplished this magic, out of his indestructible and indomitable will, but how? From what new source?

Men worked in the blazing sunlight, along the banks of new cut ground; in the pits and canyons, the asses, the panniers, the baskets, the earth movers, all pressed forward, if not speedily, steadily.

In the centre of the compound stood the old house which served a hundred purposes for the encampment. Around it were a dozen round tents, twenty feet in diameter, or sixty feet round. These served the engineers and the superintendents, mostly European and noble Egyptian. One of the tents was for their servants, another was used as the camp kitchen. At this tent stood twenty barrels of boiled water from the fresh-water canal; it was watched over twenty-four hours a day by sentinels, so precious and vital was it to the entire operation. Around the kitchen tent, too,

were innumerable cages, left standing open during the day, for food chickens, turkeys and pigeons. None of these birds seemed ever to wander away from the area in which they were fed amply on corn and grain. Droves of asses, those indispensable beasts of burden, a small herd of sheep and goats, thirty-odd camels and dromedaries were tended by fifteen Bedouins who lay down among the animals.

Before I rode down into the compound, I sat another moment in my saddle and through seven-power field glasses searched the broken pathway of the canal. There were no horsemen abroad in this blazing heat, and I found no trace of the one I sought.

My heart pounding oddly – as if I were twenty and not almost twice that age – I swung my arm and motioned my company forward.

In the work compound, I was greeted warmly by the engineers and other friends I'd made during earlier extended stays among them. My horse was speedily removed and tended by stable boys. This was a well-run project.

Linant Bey came out of one of the round tents. He shook hands and told me that De Lesseps was out with an advance survey party south of the encampment.

I felt a faint twinge of release. I was not sure I was ready to face the Vicomte yet. I had never pretended with him to be other than what I was, a foreign service officer and British, but I had never openly conspired against him, either. I hoped to compose my countenance, but I knew De Lesseps to have a brilliant, inquisitive and inductive mind, sensitive to others as few human beings ever become. With him this developed trait was vital to survival. Any delay in confronting him was welcome.

Anyhow, it was not he I had returned to Ismailia to see.

I watched my truncated shadow hasten across the arid sand toward the front porch of the stone house where I recognised Ducelle standing alone. Even this gentleman looked good and welcome to me, because he was Oriana's father.

He welcomed me with what I sensed to be faint reserve, perhaps contracted from his daughter who had shown her distaste for me when last I was here in Ismailia.

He invited me into his office. As we entered there was a cleared space. On either side a mattress, covered with Persian carpeting, served as a divan during the day. Bedclothes were folded beneath a cushion which became a pillow by night. The head of the bed was formed by a dromedary saddle, covered with a huge sheep-skin from Sennaar, and dyed red. On either side of the bed were large saddle bags containing personal effects. In the centre were guns, and beyond them were desks, drawing boards and filing cabinets.

Ducelle sank into a swivel chair behind his desk and motioned me into a wicker chair opposite him. He spoke of progress on the canal, of the quiet, without further terrorist attack. 'We even grow hopeful again,' he said.

I tried to express interest in his conversation. I expressed pleasure in hearing that somehow the project was on track again. 'And Oriana,' I said. 'I hope she has forgiven me.'

'Oriana is a fiercely loyal, and very stubborn young girl,' was all Ducelle said.

I managed to smile. 'If I could talk to her, perhaps I could convince her, at least, of my own innocence in any attack on De Lesseps or the canal.'

Ducelle gave me an odd look. 'See her? Oriana? I'm afraid that won't be possible.'

My heart slipped its moorings and then began to throb oddly. 'Why not? What's the matter? Does she refuse absolutely to see me?'

'Oh, it isn't that at all. Oriana is no longer with me here.'

'Oh?' I said no more. I could say no more.

'She abruptly decided she wanted to go to Europe.'

'Oh?'

'She has decided, after all, to go to school there. I was most pleased at her decision.'

'Oh, I'm sure you were.'

'Yes. I've contended with her for a long time. This kind of site is no place for her. She needed the niceties she'll pick up at school.'

'I'm sure she will.'

'I used all my arguments again, trying to convince her to go to Switzerland. I believe the best schools are there.' He

smiled and shrugged. 'But as usual, she would not listen to me. She made her own decision.'

'Oh? And what was that?'

'Oriana is attending the Convent of the Sacred Heart at Paris – in the Rue de Varennes.'

The Rue de Varennes? The Convent of the Sacred Heart? What about these two names was familiar to me, in fact stirred me oddly? I heard Ducelle continuing to talk, but I barely heard him. I recalled the school, the street, and what it must have meant to Oriana. Empress Eugenie had attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart. I remembered the day Oriana had been presented to her highness; never had a young girl been so impressed, nor left feeling so inferior. I felt the sharp stab of pain. I was touched by Oriana's desire to learn, as the Empress Eugenie had learned, and to learn all that great lady had absorbed in school. Oriana had chosen an exotic model indeed.

'Oriana has always wanted a home,' Ducelle was saying. He smiled. 'I think she was born the ideal homemaker, despite the fact that I've dragged her half across the globe since her childhood. All she ever really wanted was a place, with a fence and a garden, where she could put down her roots . . . One thing pleases me, this convent will certainly prepare her for the life she wants above all else.'

'Indeed it will,' I said. I felt as if the carpeting and flooring and earth itself had been yanked from beneath me.

'I shall miss her, of course.'

'Of course you shall.'

'I've had her at my side since she was a skinny, brown-as-a-nut tomboy. I feel as if I've lost an arm.'

'I understand.'

'But I knew all along what was best for her. It was simply a matter of convincing her she should go off to school – or rather of letting her convince herself, since this is the only way she does things.'

'I know it is for the best,' I said. 'For everyone.' Then, because I am a mortal fool, and maybe even more fool than mortal, I said, 'Did she – leave any message for me?'

Ducelle considered this for a moment, then he nodded and smiled. 'As a matter of fact, she did, Tony. She said to

tell you goodbye, that she was going to school to learn to become a great lady, of whom no one need ever be ashamed – '

'No one need ever be ashamed of her – '

' – and that she had taken your advice at last. She was going away to escape the contagion.' He laughed. 'I find that hard to believe, after she worked sixty hours at a stretch during the worst attack of the cholera.'

I exhaled heavily. 'There are all kinds of contagions,' I said. 'And some are worse than others.'

'Well, at least, she's gone and she's safe,' Ducelle said.

She was gone and she was safe. Only I was left in the empty hell of the place where once she had walked, once she had laughed – and even, I knew deep inside – loved. There was no comfort in this admission; there was no comfort anywhere in this blazing hot and empty place. Thinking back to her was like trying to warm oneself from the brilliant afterglow of some ancient star, long dead and cold and gone.

# XII

DE LESSEPS RETURNED to the camp at Ismailia the following evening. Sun-blistered, exhausted, he still walked with a swagger, as if it were somehow unfitting that he admit fatigue.

He welcomed me back as if I were a member of his family, at least. This did nothing to quench the feeling of guilt I felt in my attempt to co-operate in British efforts to terminate him out here.

When I complimented him on his being able to replace destroyed machinery so quickly, miraculously and with such dispatch, he only laughed. 'I merely borrow further beyond my resources, my boy, that's all. As a matter of fact, what I have done is very likely criminal. I have not studied on its legality. I've been too preoccupied with daily crises. Anyhow, as yet I have not been forced to actual forgery. Unless one counts verbal forgery . . . I have been able to extend my credit immeasurably by vocally invoking the name of my cousin, the Empress Eugenie.'

'My God.'

He shrugged. 'A minor crime indeed, my boy, in the lexicon of those known crimes possible to me in order to keep this project viable when others lose their vision, or courage – or integrity.'

I studied him, unable to find the least diminution in his enthusiasm and tenacity of purpose. He seemed to exude self-confidence. I as well as anyone, knew him to be a bedevilled man, harassed from all sides, betrayed and deserted by friends, opposed by allies who smiled in his face, attacked by enemies who struck stealthily in the dark. And yet, he showed that bold front to the world; he looked unconquerable; he sounded as resolute and audacious as ever.

I fell silent, overcome with a sudden morose mood that was almost crippling. I had overtly acted against him for the first time. I had shown my people one more way in which they might obstruct and impede him. Away from his august presence what I'd done had even seemed somewhat patriotic, honourable and reasonable. In his company however, one fell under his spell, one saw his own dishonesty for what it was, even wrapped in the British flag.

De Lesseps was prowling the ill-fitting room like some animal too large for its cage, and he paused abruptly staring down at me. 'What's the matter?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. I feel this empty sense of – dissatisfaction.'

'With what?'

'No one thing. Everything. The evening star isn't nearly as bright as it was when I was a boy. It used to glitter like a miniature sun. And there were more stars out at night. I never see the milky way strung across the sky as brilliantly as it once was. It doesn't rain as much. Water levels are lower in the rivers. Water is a problem as never before. Prices are too high, laws too rigid, and the wrong people are in power, and the people who ought to care don't give a damn. Anyway, I'm off my feed.'

'And young Oriana has decamped to Paris.'

I sighed. 'Well, that hasn't really helped, though I see it is clearly in her best interests. In her very best interests.'

He stood, legs apart, staring down at me. 'Let me hazard a guess. You went charging back to the British Embassy in Cairo to find out if British mercenaries, or British money, or British intelligence, were involved in the bombings out here.'

I smiled ruefully. 'Do *you* have spies too?'

'I don't need spies, my dear boy. When a decent man is outraged, he reacts in outrage. Beware the violence of a patient man, or a decent man . . . I knew where you were going when you left here.'

My face burned faintly red. He had called me a decent man. I felt I didn't deserve this appellation, didn't meet the minimum standard requirements for such a role. Lately, I'd

come to believe it was a part I was constitutionally incapable of playing. I couldn't be totally honest with my own country, or fair to those I admired, even unwillingly.

'Perhaps you won't think me so *decent* when you hear the suggestions I made for hindering you further here on this project, or the reason why they've sent me back to Ismailia.'

He shook his head. 'I spent my early life in the diplomatic service, my boy. I understand your problems, as well as you. You don't have to divulge foreign service secrets. I know you have them. As I must have mine. I know that you are required by your job and your oath to do things you may not approve or like to do. I know all that. You and I – we must base our friendship upon this knowledge, not in some mutual oversight of it.'

'Friendship?' I shook my head. 'Isn't your offering me friendship under present conditions rather like taking one of Cleopatra's asps to your chest?'

'Not at all. I know what an asp will do. I think I know what you will do – '

'Then you're well ahead of me.'

He nodded seriously. 'Perhaps I am. Perhaps I have to stay well ahead in order to survive. Ahead of my friends. Ahead of my enemies. I tell you frankly, I am not sure which of my closest advisers and oldest supporters I can fully trust at this moment. I even await the final disavowal of my own government . . . A burnt child dreads fire.'

He paced again, too big for the room, the walls seeming to crowd about his thick shoulders and leonine head. 'Close advisers suggest I return at once to France in order to plead with my cousin Eugenie for her renewed and redoubled support, to place the sum of all my arguments in favour of this great project once again before Louis Napoleon . . .' He shook his head, in deep thought, almost as if he spoke to himself. 'I am wary about going back, even to Paris, just now. My enemies crouch there, waiting to pounce. If I should go back, as things are, I should place myself in that perilous position of having to depend on others . . .

'This is what I am trying to say to you. I lean on you for the strengths I know you to possess. I would never presume upon your weaknesses – weaknesses, not from your view, or

of your own corpus, but weaknesses from my vantage point. I think I know best and I think I know how far I can ever depend on you – and your friendship.

'I must never depend on others out here. On no one. My ambition, I confess, is to pull all the strings of this immense affair *alone* until it can finally be completed without restraints. Maybe I'm like Moses trying to get only within sight of the promised land, eh? In a word, I must do it myself. All of it. I shall accept conditions from no one. I shall impose all conditions myself.'

He nodded, seeming to mull this over in his mind, and finding it satisfactory. 'Success or failure will then be on my own shoulders alone. When, as a young man, I was French agent for old Mehemet Ali, that great regent said to me one day, "If in the course of your life, Fernando, you ever have anything important to do, remember, my young friend, that you must depend on yourself alone. *If there are two of you, there is already one too many.*"'

He strode back and stood, smiling down at me. 'All of this is simply to reassure you. Disabuse yourself of guilt in your dealings with me here. You are British. You are British first of all. Could a Frenchman such as I be blind to this? I ask no disloyalty to your mission or to your Queen. As I'm sure you expect no such disloyalty or irresponsibility from me.'

I smiled. 'I suppose it's enough to have me where you can watch me?'

He shook his graying head. 'No, you're wrong. Such a consideration has nothing to do with our relationship. I know that you are smart enough to know we have a magnificent and progressive project at work here which must bring earth-shaking impact to the world. Only rigid minds could remain closed to its potential and profit for all nations – perhaps your maritime country above all others . . . One day, I believe with all my heart, you will see the glory to be achieved in England's name here in the Suez . . . When that great day comes, I shall have an ally supreme. One I believe who will be as hard to stop as I myself am.' He smiled and spread his hands. 'And still, even then, I shall be wary of you as I love you.'

'It must be a hell of a way to live.'

He shrugged. 'I find no easy ways these days. I have a job to do. Its price is high. Let's say I've considered everything and that I'm prepared to pay that cost – whatever it is.'

I was silent a moment and then I blurted out, 'But they sent me back here to intercede on behalf of Murray – '

'That bastard.'

'Exactly. He ran from Egypt when Said Pasha came to power. He was an evil influence against Said Pasha when Said's uncle was regent, as you well know. You rightly hated Murray for his part in the persecution of Said Pasha. Now – with Ismail Pasha as Viceroy, Murray wants to come back into Egypt. But he doesn't find it all that easy, even with the power and influence of Her Majesty's government behind him. Because of his vicious past here in Egypt, he finds himself unacceptable to Ismail Pasha . . . He prays, for God's sake, that *you* might use your influence on his behalf with Ismail Pasha.'

De Lesseps laughed. He put his head back laughing and I sat there, watching him laugh until he cried . . . .

Our small company, making good time, headed south towards Pelisium, near to which stand the ruins of the modern Castle of Tineh.

'*Tineh* the Arab word, and *Pelisium*, the Greek word, have the same signification,' De Lesseps said to me. 'Both may be translated into our languages as mud!'

I was astounded that he could appear so casual and at ease. I said as much. He glanced at me from his great dromedary saddle and smiled. 'You mean because I have extended my credit so far beyond my capital resources?'

I smiled. 'I suppose we British fear debt even more than blasphemy.'

He shrugged. 'I fear debt not at all. I fear nothing but failure, and I shall not fail . . . I appreciate your concern. But you worry too much about me. I know that finally I shall have to return to Paris and face my creditors and stock-holders and other assorted enemies. But I also know if I return with this affair an accomplished fact, or well on the way to completion, if I were to say to any three or four great

bankers – including the Rothschilds who have been so totally disinterested and unco-operative – if I were to say to them, look at my accomplishment, not my debt. Look. There are thirty million francs to be made out there in a fortnight – take twenty million, I will take ten, nothing wil be easier of achievement. This may endanger the rewards and credit I mean for the solvent shareholders to take, but needless to say, I shall be most firm on this point. Although, advisers now tell me I should turn my back on the small investors and ought to address myself from this moment only to great capitalists.' He shook his head. 'I have treated these advisers as I always do those who cannot see, whom I cannot convince: I have allowed them to talk, answering now and then, "hum! hum!" which they accept as the reply they wish to hear.'

We rode a few moments in silence and then he said, 'So many people seem to think the larks should fall down roasted, ready for them to eat, while I burn my own fingers . . . But, I have also found warm-hearted and devoted people. And, I am more confirmed than ever that in this world good outweighs evil.'

'Even a world in which there are men like Murray?' I said.

'Even so.' He laughed again. 'We shall not hang Mr Murray, my dear friend. We shall only furnish the hemp and let the gentleman hang himself.'

We found the land around Pelisium more than muddy; the whole region had been swamped by the overflowing Nile. We climbed the high dunes, going far around the inundated fields.

The cold was intense and De Lesseps and I, along with the engineers, surveyors and auditors who accompanied us, often walked during the morning to warm ourselves, leading our dromedaries by ropes.

The Egyptian donkey-and-camel-handlers spent a great deal of time praying to their Prophet for protection against attacks of Bedouins. If one of these roaming Arabs approached, asking for a little tobacco or a cup of coffee, the animal tenders quailed, as if their last hour had arrived, and scarcely breathed until the ragged nomads departed. Then they thumped their animals with their staffs, forcing

them to go faster along the trail, and always looking over their shoulders.

We skirted the shore of Lake Menzaleh instead of crossing the desert, and made for the entrance to El Guisr. We set up our tents at five o'clock along the washboard foot of one of the loftiest and strangest dunes I'd ever seen on the isthmus.

At the end of the third day we approached the port of Suez where De Lesseps had been informed Mohammed Ismail was in residence, vacationing in his palace overlooking the harbour.

We went at a brisk trot, hoping to reach Suez by mid-morning of the fourth day. On our left reared the chain of mountains beginning with the Mokattam and ending at the Atakah, along the base of which ran the Suez road.

On the right we could make out the minarets of Khanka, jewels glittering in a setting of deep green date trees and the winding marshes of vegetation marking the silt-rich course of the Nile. Early in the century cotton had been introduced to the Nile valley and Egypt was fast becoming a lint-supplier to the world, rivalling the south of the United States which was torn in a civil war.

We passed Abouzambel and saw the obelisk of Heliopolis, the city of the sun, where in antiquity Plato studied the archives of the Egyptian priests for seventeen years.

We rode along the outskirts of the tiny village of Matarieh, a place embedded in lush gardens. De Lesseps pointed out for us the so-called Tree of the Virgin, twisted in that lovely setting. Then we passed Berket-el-Haggi, the Lake of the Pilgrims, where the huge caravan from Mecca assembles every year to escort the sacred carpet to be laid upon the tomb of the Prophet.

Before us we could see the massive palace of Abassieh, with its 2,000 windows gleaming in the sun, another of the palatial castles built by Abbas Pasha before his assassination. Far across the Nile rose the summits of the two Great Pyramids, sand blasted for more than sixty centuries.

The sun refracted blindingly now from the tapering spires

of the mosque of Oriental alabaster, built by Mehemet Ali within the gates of the Citadel, and in which that regent had hoped to be buried.

De Lesseps remembered how in 1803 when his father had been Political Agent for France in Egypt, Bonaparte, then First Consul, gave Matthew De Lesseps instructions to find a Turkish Chief of sufficient energy and intelligence to be proposed at Constantinople for reinvestiture with the power, then almost nominal, of Pasha of Cairo.

'My father discovered Mehemet Ali, a native of Macedonia, and a commander of some one thousand Bashi-Bazouks. Mehemet Ali could neither read nor write. He became the guest and friend of my father who advised and encouraged him to resist the encroachments of the Mamelukes, who were the enemies of France. Mehemet Ali proved worthy of the great future in store for him. He showed so great a superiority to those of his own rank that Colonel Sabastiani, then the French Ambassador at Constantinople, used his influence to obtain Mehemet Ali's investiture with the Pashalic of Cairo.'

That same afternoon I accompanied De Lesseps to Ismail Pasha's palace on the heights overlooking the sparkling red-tinted harbour of Suez. Ismail had, since coming into power, already spent more than a million francs on furnishings imported from France.

De Lesseps and I went up from the magnificent ground floor where were lavish apartments and a luxurious harem. Crossing a grand room, longer than the *Salle de pas Perdus* in the *Palais de Justice* of Paris, I saw standing before incredible hand-woven tapestry hangings, eunuchs, armed, poised, on guard.

We mounted the staircase, the railing of which was carved rosewood inlaid with silver, with crystal balusters by Baccarat.

We were immediately and graciously received by the new regent. Ismail was the second son of Ibrahim Pasha, and I had met him first in 1854. He had a fine, intelligent and distinguished countenance, with a strong resemblance to the fierce Mehemet Ali. When I'd first met Ismail Pasha, he'd been twenty-five years old, and already the father of a dozen

children. At that time he had been addicted only to pleasure and self-indulgence. He seemed to have changed and grown more sombre in ten years.

As soon as we were comfortable on pillowed divans, Ismail launched into complaints about the incredible costs of the canal.

De Lesseps spoke soothingly, as if the Viceroy were one of his younger sons. 'You must not think of the present, your highness, but of the glory that will accrue to you in the future – '

'But I shall be bankrupt!'

'None of us shall be bankrupt. Gold will pour into your coffers once that canal is opened – '

'Once it is opened. I hear it shall never be opened. British influence is strong in Constantinople now, and the British caution the Vizier not only to go slowly, but to reverse his former positions.'

'Your highness, I am convinced that England will one day profit more than any other country by our new passage here in the Suez. But we must not close our eyes to the fact that our actions here strike a blow at the old egotistical policy of the British. This greatly excites and infuriates them, making them blind to their own potential profit.

'I expected no less, your highness, nor must you. I am well aware of the British policy followed in Egypt. Why did they do all in their power to prevent the success of Bonaparte's expedition? Why did they protect the Mamelukes who partitioned this nation, suppressed foreign commerce, and condemned the fertile Valley of the Nile into sterility? Why did they unite the whole of Europe in 1810 to check the progress of Napoleon and Mehemet Ali? Why did they uphold and encourage Abbas Pasha, that bigoted prince, the enemy of all progress, whom Providence removed just as he was about to complete the disorganisation and ruin of Egypt?

'I can tell you why. Because there was then a party in England who were anxious to reduce the Viceroy to the condition of those Rajahs in India, whose vices are encouraged until they have sunk so low that there is nothing left for them but to ask for protection or to sell their States.

'That is only a present state of affairs. It will pass. Everybody does not think alike in England. There are men of feeling and intelligence, and I believe they shall prevail.

'But it is here in Egypt where you shall prevail, triumph and be recalled in glory as the man responsible for the greatest engineering achievement of the nineteenth century. Think of it, Ismail. You. Not only the profits from such a necessary canal, but the magnificence of standing in history as the most far-seeing of Egyptian rulers.

'I vow to you. Another year. Two at the most. By the time your great opera house is constructed and ready in Port Said. By the time Guiseppe Verdi has finished his opera written in honour of the opening of *your* canal. By then your majesty, the time of evil will be past, and there will be only the hour of glory.'

I saw Mohammed Ismail waver. God knew De Lesseps was persuasive and he appealed to a vain man's vanity. 'But – this Verdi . . . I hear he now says he cannot have his great opus complete and rehearsed in time for the opening of our opera house.'

'Of course he will! Guissepe Verdi is an egotistical, self-important Italian who smells terribly of garlic. He gets along with no one. He told me that he could not complete his opera in time for the opening of the canal, and I laughed at him. I asked him if we should put off that great event to accommodate him, and he quite seriously said this would be satisfactory.

'I'll tell you what he is like. He composes his music, then turns it over to copyists whose job it is to transpose it for public use. Then when he sees what these copyists have done, he flies into rages. They have put dots and staffs and curlicues in all the wrong places and not as he intended them at all. He rips the sheets of music to shreds and they must start over, and again they are wrong.

'They would be wrong a hundred times until someone shows the great man that the "mistakes" are not mistakes at all, but slavish copies of his own work. This brings on greater rages. How dare they question him? How dare they suggest he might be in error?

'Well, that goes on forever, but finally, we shall have our

opera, our opera house and our celebration of the first ship to sail through the canal from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. This I vow to you. Trust me, your highness. Support me, and I shall not fail you.'

Ismail Pasha sat quietly for sometime upon his pillows. Finally, he managed to say in a small voice, 'Why have you come then if not to demand more money for your project?'

De Lesseps smiled. 'I am here to prove to you my own magnanimity, your highness. I suppose you have heard that former Consul General Murray is in Suez?'

'Yes.' The Regent's face flushed red. 'He is in Suez. He followed me from Port Said where I refused to see him, to Cairo where I refused again, and here where I shall refuse a third time.'

'I have come to ask you to see him.'

'I cannot believe this. You have as much reason as the members of my own family for despising the British hellion who inspired Abbas Pasha against Said, your dearest friend.'

'I know all that, your highness. I also know that the British continue to do all in their power to impede us. I have learned from Lord Stratford himself that Consul General Bruce does not forward any of the documents I sent to Stratford through the Embassy. Bruce claims he can send no documents to the Embassy at Constantinople unless they are cleared by the French Consul General at Cairo. This is simply another stalling tactic, another delay. We must be bigger than this.'

'I cannot understand how Mr Murray can have the insolence to ask to see me.'

'See Murray, your highness. Please. Do not fear him. But don't hurt the feelings of the British Agent. One day we shall need Great Britain. I am counting on their support when that day comes.'

'I refuse. Not only do I have good reason for my hatred of this man Murray personally, but I have been blackmailed in attempts to force me to receive him. My dear Fernando, you don't know the insinuations that have been thrown out to induce me to honour this man Murray. Unless I do, they say, England will take offence – '

'As they certainly shall, Highness.'

'They even compare my treatment of Murray with my reception of you. This enraged me and I told them that I did not receive you as a Frenchman or as a Minister, but as my old and well-tried friend.'

'Thank you, your highness,' De Lesseps said. 'But this adds only another to my many motives for urging you to name an early date to Mr Bruce for giving an audience to Mr Murray. Let our friend here, Tony Hamilton, take that good word to Bruce himself. It will improve our relations. I'm sure of that. And if you can't overlook your grievances against Murray, I do not ask you to forget them. But you must remember that in exalted public positions grave interests are often compromised by a betrayal of private animosity. All this does not mean you cannot have your own opinion, and that you are forced to give your confidence and friendship to any but those who are worthy of them.'

'I do not see how I can entertain this man, even to please you.' Ismail Pasha shook his head, face chilled.

De Lesseps spread his hands. 'There are wounds which must be laid bare, your highness, in order to cure them.' There passed a great deal of time in which Ismail Pasha coldly changed the subject a dozen times, but just as we were leaving, he said, 'In the name of my friendship for you, I shall receive the British Agent Murray. I shall let him see at once how little he can expect from me. If I am forced to shake his hand, I am not going to offer my hand to any friend on that same day, after having given it to an enemy. I shall remember you. I shall be diplomatic. I shall say many things I shall not mean.'

Clements Murray was tall, very slender, gray and as cold as an iced haddock. He was impeccably attired, as if a large portion of his income was budgeted directly to Bond Street; his morning suit and high hat were set off with a small, elegant and quite proper school tie, and laced cuffs. He was shrewd, thick-skinned, driven, lofty with pride, overbearing, haughtily contemptuous. These were his pleasant traits. But one had to confess him a patriotic British subject; more than that, one felt that Murray owned

some controlling interest in the commonwealth which he was compelled to protect with body, soul and whatever blood flowed in his rigid veins. He had no thought and no interest in this life except the profit, well-being and superiority in every contact of the British stance.

I was nominated by Consul General Bruce to accompany Mr Murray when Mohammed Ismail finally agreed to receive the British Agent. To this end, I remained at the India Hotel after De Lesseps and his company departed for Ismailia.

Murray and I went to the Regent's palace on a brilliantly hot day, the sky milk-white and dazzling. We approached along its entrance avenue, a league in length, shaded by huge sycamore trees which formed a thick, velvety green canopy. Murray began to sniff in disapproval, the lines widening about his mouth, his nostrils flaring more even than usual, when we passed the armed eunuchs in the grand lower corridor of exotic tapestries. Mohammed Ismail greeted us warmly, with far more warmth than I'd anticipated, recalling the way he had protested to De Lesseps against even greeting Murray at all.

Murray stared along his nose at the Viceroy as if Ismail were less than the most degenerate Rajah in some unknown Indian State and began at once berating Ismail Pasha for receiving him only when requested to do so by the French.

I gazed at Murray, shocked, angered and incredulous. Was this the way Murray expected to gain the Viceroy's confidence? Or was it more important to him to establish his own superiority in this conference as the representative of Her Majesty? I retreated a step or so, having all the importance here of a gunbearer in another kind of safari in deeper Africa.

Ismail Pasha winced and his proud face went slightly ashen under its dark tan. His eyes glittered. He faltered a moment and I saw something I had not expected to see: Ismail feared Murray; the only reason I could think of was that the memory of terror remained in the back of the young regent's mind. While Abbas Pasha reigned, Murray had held what almost amounted to power of life or death over the younger brothers and nephews of Abbas Pasha.

Timid inwardly, or not, Ismail Pasha lashed back in a voice that matched the haughty tone of our British Agent: 'The favour I have done in seeing you, Mr Murray, is not in obedience to the French, but to please a friend, an adviser. That he were French or English or Egyptian does not enter into it. However, if you wish now to speak about the canal project, I shall delay our conference until Vicomte De Lesseps can be present.'

Murray's tone softened slightly, though his haughty expression did not. 'That won't be necessary, your highness. We British are your friends. We have always been the friends of Egypt. We will be your friends as long as you will let us.'

Ismail gazed at him intently. 'That is up to you, sir,' he said.

Murray stirred impatiently on the divan. 'Your friends – in high places in British councils – feel you have acted hastily, highness, in the matter of this canal project – and without asking or receiving counsel of your true friends.'

'Vicomte De Lesseps holds a Firman of Concession, sir, which he had a long time before I came to power here in Egypt.'

'Haste nevertheless characterised the way that concession was granted. But that does not have to bind you. There are many ways to abrogate such an unrealistic contract.'

Ismail Pasha said nothing, merely sat, eyes hooded, waiting.

Murray cleared his throat. 'England opposes this canal. It is at best, reckless adventuring. It is fiscally wasteful and damaging. It destroys the good feeling between our two nations. I have been instructed to advise you, Ismail Pasha, as your true friend, that if you continue in this reckless adventure, Britain shall have no recourse but to oppose you.'

Ismail Pasha glanced towards me. I met his gaze, but said nothing. He returned his eyes to Murray's face, puzzled, but cold. 'Why do you oppose us in this project which is truly universal – in that it will benefit *all* nations?'

Murray's mouth twisted bitterly. 'Well, I see you have

been taught all the correct French words, haven't you?' He shook his head as if overcome with frustration in dealing with this lower intellect, able only to ape the phrases taught him by those who controlled him as their puppet. 'I can tell you in a few words why England – and all conservative and honest nations – oppose this canal project across the Suez.'

Ismail Pasha stared at Murray, waiting. It was quiet in the high-ceilinged chamber. Through the tall narrow windows drifted the muted music of lyre and flute from some unseen garden; the drone of flies was loud.

'This canal will open the south – all of Asia – to the adventuring of greedy and ambitious Mediterranean countries. Owning this canal will give the French an inordinate influence in the middle East. And finally, this project is contrary to all English policy in this area.'

Ismail Pasha was silent a moment. I saw him biting at his full, apricot-coloured underlip for a moment, then he drew a deep breath, tilted his regal head and spoke defiantly. 'Are you saying everything sir, or are you leaving unsaid several things? I am told that you have threatened the Grand Vizier of Turkey with a British attack when your present business in the Black Sea is ended, unless he follows your specific directives in the matter of this canal project.'

Murray's face flushed red to his graying hair line. 'Anyone who tells you this lies to you. Bring that informant before you, and I shall name him liar to your face.'

I glanced at Murray, seeing how brazen power could make one. I knew that Ismail Pasha spoke the truth, Murray knew it and Ismail Pasha knew it, and yet Murray brazenly denied it.

Ismail Pasha almost smiled for the first time since the moment of our arrival. 'I shall as you demand write at once to the Grand Vizier, Mr Murray. I was told these facts in correspondence from the Supreme Porte at Constantinople himself.'

Murray wavered briefly, but for less than a breath. He sat straighter and shook his head. 'Nonsense. If you drew any such inference from the Supreme Porte's correspondence, I am sure it is a misunderstanding.'

Ismail Pasha didn't even bother answering that.

I sat watching Murray retreat slightly. I hoped he would take a new tack. I was seeing British diplomacy as practised world-wide with smaller, weaker nations. British Agents threatened and bullied until they reached the fear threshold and then contracts between the two parties were drawn, to Her Majesty's total benefit, or not drawn at all. This was not a British syndrome alone; all great powers' diplomacy amounted to the same kind of tactics. Threaten and bully and demand and never retreat.

As anticipated, Murray did not retreat now. He smiled coldly and said, 'Let's look at this thing reasonably, your highness. We British cannot condone your throwing your country into the arms of the French. This is not for our benefit, but for yours. We have at heart only your best interests. In the first place, the Second Empire has little stability. Damn little stability, in fact. They'll promise you anything today, but will they be able to keep those promises tomorrow? On the other hand, English Agents who deal with you can deliver what we promise. We are always upheld and supported at home. Always. By a strong and stable empire that stretches across the globe. Be well advised, young sir, we British wish with all our hearts to be friendly with you people. But understand this: our anger can be very dangerous. We are ruthless with those who betray us. We are a nation which must be treated with respect and consideration.'

Ismail said only, 'I hope that respect and consideration can be mutual, sir.'

Murray winced slightly. 'We ask only that you delay any further adventuring with the French out here, that's all.'

Ismail shook his head. He spoke in a dead flat tone as if he were fatigued with the entire subject and with his guests. 'We in Egypt have thrown in our lot with the French.'

Reason said that Murray could not have been astonished by this simple statement and yet his sharp intake of breath was the loudest sound in the chamber.

'Are you aware, your highness,' Murray said, 'that the internal tranquillity of unstable France and its exterior influence and strength, as well, depend upon a pistol-shot which the hated Emperor may receive any day? Assassination

of Louis Napoleon is a constant threat in Paris. He is under total security, and yet he is not safe.'

Ismail Pasha shrugged, the fatalistic Egyptian. 'None of us is immortal, Mr Murray.'

'If we cannot influence you to wisdom and reason in any other way,' Murray said in his most insulting tone, 'I must inform your highness that we British have a new agreement signed by the Grand Vizier in Turkey to defer any further progress of this accursed ditch until the Supreme Porte can appoint a Commission of Three to enter into an elaborate and minute examination of the articles of the Egyptian Firman. That document is to be scrutinised as closely as possible by your superior authorities. I don't have to remind you that you are subject to the rule and laws of Turkey.'

'No. I am quite aware of this.'

'If nothing else, I warn you that this action of re-examination of the Egyptian Firman alone may well consume five years. That is a most conservative estimate. If you follow your present reckless course, while restrained by supreme authority from Turkey, you may well be bankrupt in five years.'

There was a cold silence until Murray spoke in an almost conciliatory tone. He felt he had deflated and defeated his opposition and now he could be generous. 'Well?'

'Are you awaiting an answer from me?' Ismail Pasha inquired.

'I am indeed.'

'Then you shall have it now. The answer to take back to London and to Constantinople. It is very simple. My answer, Mr Murray, is that I shall never permit such an inspection of our signed and approved documents.'

Murray's patrician face went gray as if he had been slugged by some street hooligan under his belt buckle. He looked as if he might vomit, but he recovered quickly. He even managed a patronising smile. 'Are you afraid of such a survey of your documents, your highness?'

'No. I am not afraid of an inspection or what it might show. But I am afraid – deathly afraid – of setting a precedent which might allow the Porte to hinder Egyptian internal administration. I not only fear it, I reject it out of

hand. There shall be no such action taken by anyone outside Egypt. I shall oppose such illegal activity with the last man in my army, the last piastre in my treasury, with the last breath in my body. The very suggestion is insulting and intolerable.' He came fluidly to his feet from his seated position on the soft divan. His face was sharp as a hatchet. 'I bid you good day, sir. I bid you good day.'

He turned his back and walked to a window overlooking a garden.

Murray was enraged, but he dared not protest. In the present circumstances, to speak in the presence of the Viceroy after he had ended the interview might well get him barred forever from Egypt. He jerked his head towards me and we left.

We British had lost again – at least, we had suffered defeat in this round; one could never say that Clements Murray was ever defeated finally. But Ismail Pasha had out-fenced, out-thought and out-threatened him. Why then in God's name did I feel like cheering a frightened little brown man as he stood up to the insolence of one of Her Majesty's agents? I could not say. Even now, I had better not say . . . .

Murray was still quivering with rage when we were ushered into Consul-General Bruce's office. One of the first things Murray said when Bruce asked how things had gone, was, 'I shall make my full report, Bruce. In writing. Meantime, I must ask you why you sent young Hamilton along? He was certainly of no help at all.'

I smiled and shrugged. Murray was a superior and I knew that he could not only not blame himself for his failure in dealing with Mohammed Ismail, he could not let official blame taint him, either. He was already able to assess the blame where it belonged, on my poor performance, or rather on my ineffectual lack of action.

'We might have convinced this renegade,' Murray said, 'if Hamilton here had come through with some of that vaunted influence you promised me he had with this savage. Yes. Yes. We might have brought it off, if I'd had a modicum of co-operation and assistance.'

Bruce said some soothing words and they passed on to more urgent matters. That week I was reassigned out of Egypt. I could not say I was unhappy to go. The emptiness I felt had nothing to do with failure, but with loss. Any place on the globe would be empty without Oriana. But Egypt held no special lure for me now. Though Oriana once had walked its hot sands, she was gone now as if she had never been here. And I was ready to go too.

Before I departed Suez, at my last audience with Mohammed Ismail, I told him I hoped he had a long and successful reign. He shrugged and laughed. 'I'm afraid I make enemies in high places, Tony.'

I smiled and asked him how he'd found the courage to stand so fiercely against the man who had terrified the strongest of his forebears?

He shrugged again, no longer smiling. 'Upon my word, Tony, I had not thought much about it. It was an act of impulse. Mr Murray enraged me, even more than he frightened me. He enraged me, I reacted in rage. You know, I have never been much given to following the usual rules. I don't do things, for example, as my father, or grandfather, did them . . . I know your nation openly opposes us now, Tony, but I hope you and I may remain friends, as always. But this I tell you. I am committed now. We in Egypt shall have our opera by Verdi, our week-long celebration, our first ship from one sea to another across the desert – somehow, we shall have our canal.'

I walked out, feeling that at last I understood why Vicomte De Lesseps had been so willing, anxious, to accommodate my request to arrange an audience with Mohammed Ismail for Mr Murray.

I wanted to laugh. Whatever De Lesseps did, one could be sure it was for the final benefit of his canal. I bit back my laughter.

Somehow it didn't seem patriotic.

# XIII

I LIVED FOR the next three years in hateful exile from Oriana. No one spoke her name in my presence; no one mentioned her in letters or communiqués, though sometimes I searched the dry Home Office directives for just the sight of her name. Oriana. Believe me, if I could have, I would have put her forever from my mind and got on with the business of my life. This was certainly the reasonable course I wanted to follow, like a troubled craft tacking in dread of an alien sail.

Forgetting was not all that easy. We may control our conscious thoughts, but our subconscious mind flows its own unbridled course, going in wild tangents, dipping deeply, numb on its dark and silent run, or splashing shallowly over sunlit pebbles, doubling back, and twisting tortuously where you never want to go, but where you must follow helplessly in the dark night. It holds its own counsel, plays its own mindless tricks, and never lets you free.

Sometimes, for hours during a day, I would not allow Oriana into the perimeter of my conscious mind. Then a sudden laugh, or a bright young voice, a slender girl hurrying in a teeming crowd, and Oriana came racing back to haunt me.

Nights, lying sleepless, I became convinced that she was so intensely concentrating on me that it was almost as if we could communicate across space and silence. I stirred, sleepless. I had the sure sense of certainty that Oriana too lay unable to sleep, even half around the globe, or allowing for vast differences in time.

I lay and sweated – winter or tropical sweltering summer had nothing to do with it – and remembered back to her, and longed for her and came to realise that I would not gain

very much even if I put her aside and got on with the briefly interrupted business of my life. What was there about my life that was so urgent, or worthwhile, or appealing, without her?

I had the satisfaction of knowing I had done the right thing to reject her, to send her away from me untouched, to toss her back to grow up and find her own life. But this proved a chilled comfort in the lonely dark. It was no comfort at all. It was its own brand of hell.

She was a memory, a love, a desire, that would not die, that time could not alter and distance could not dim, and against which my reason wallowed, helpless.

I don't know if I can make you understand my mood of unhappiness and the desperation of my need. One understands these things instinctively, or one does not empathise at all. You accept this agonised longing – as unreasonable as it seems – because you know that's the way it is. Or you reject the whole idea out of hand. You either feel deeply that kind of passion, or you never understand it, in yourself, and certainly not in anyone else. If you have never loved like that, God knows I envy you. I pity you, but I envy you. To live in such emotional serenity must be like existing forever beside the still flat surface of an empty millpond.

As for me, it was as if I had pushed out in a small boat upon the glassy surface of my own millpond, only to find myself suddenly caught by the unsuspected currents and propelled along until I found myself fighting desperately to keep from being borne out to sea by a raging tide.

I trudged across this planet as I was reassigned in those three years, but for me the world was a draughty room decorated in sombre grays. Time plodded along as if it had lost its way, even retracing its steps across the most painful stretches of this pathless void into which I was cast.

I worked hard. I drank hard. I looked desperately for that excitement, that desolation, that fascination, I knew I must find in some new romance. Once, romantic conquests had been important to me and my ego. I realised it was no longer the same, that transient affairs would never be important to me any more. It didn't matter which new female I seduced,

she was not the one I wanted.

I valiantly tried to reconcile myself to the truth. Oriana was a young girl. In these three years she'd probably broken a dozen young hearts, including her own; shallow fractures, quickly healed, quickly forgotten, as God knew, by now I had been forgotten.

There remained only my own requisite, to forget her, but despite my resolutions, my will and my whisky, I lived with her memory and with its torment. When I slept, she haunted me, and when I woke up, whispering her name, torment had me by the throat for another eternal day.

Maybe I cried in the lonely dawn. I don't know. Only God knows how much I felt like crying.

The world moved on around me. It spun uncaringly on its axis. Life went on. De Lesseps' ditch ploughed and chewed and inched its way tortuously slowly across the Isthmus of Suez between two waiting seas. I heard little from the project, except the newspaper communiqués which no one could escape from Liverpool to Shanghai. The world was fascinated with the superhuman efforts of the Frenchman as he held his *Compagnie Universelle* together with lies, promises, spit and glue.

One thing I knew. Work continued, despite Shiite priests who appeared on work sites and exhorted the labourers to stop defying their Islamic God, to stop digging and to stop working for invading infidels.

I waited in a sick kind of tension which dissipated slightly and gradually as the months passed, for another man-planted explosion along the canal. It did not happen. I wondered if perhaps Oriana nodded her beautiful little head knowingly, Tony Hamilton was no longer in Egypt, ergo there were no longer terrorist or mercenary attacks.

At least, work continued.

The community of nations was a busy place in those three years. Three years doesn't sound like a long time, but it can be an eternity.

Three years. One can say three years trippingly on the tongue and it seems no more than a wink in the jaundiced eye of time. It is not very considerable compared to the age

of the Sphinx, the Roman occupation of Egypt, or even the digging of the Suez canal. But it was an eternity for me.

An abortive Fenian uprising erupted and was stilled in England. This ten-year-old secret Brotherhood, founded in New York, had extended to Ireland. It was dedicated to the overthrow of English rule in Ireland. The Fenians were truly active against the crown, even invading Canada.

The Dominion of Canada was formed, a Governor-General appointed, and I was sent as one of Her Majesty's representatives when the first Federal Parliament met at Ottawa.

The United States bought Alaska from Russia. In Spain, Queen Isabella's rule was so shaky that she was forced to adjourn the Cortes, and our advance word was that this noble lady might have to flee her country to escape assassination. She planned, we were told, to run to France, where an attempt had recently been made on the life of Napoleon III.

In the United States, its Congress passed the Force Laws which were designed to control the Ku Klux Klan and other secret societies. The North German Federation was finally established and a Parliamentary government with two houses was created in Austria.

Antiseptics and anaesthetics were gaining widespread acceptance in hospitals around the world, speeded no doubt by their successful use in battlefield operations during the Civil War in the United States.

The Atlantic Cable was laid for the second time and tested out successfully. At first, however, because of past failures, the authenticity of messages was widely doubted on both sides of the ocean.

The Turks suppressed a revolt in Crete which had proclaimed its union with Greece.

Of particular interest to De Lesseps, it seemed to me, was the continued expansion of open trade with Japan. This country had been closed and isolated until only recently. With the peace which followed the establishment of the Tokugawa dynasty of shoguns, intrigues against the dynasty failed and the shogun ruled the empire for some years with great strength from Yedo. A revolution led by the daimos

did not return Japan to its former closed status, but opened its harbours even wider. It also proved the shogun could not adapt to the rapidly changing times. The nation looked outward for the first time. This would add force to De Lesseps' renewed arguments for the value of his canal. Immense trade and profits awaited the Europeans in the Orient, and the canal was the quickest passage east.

Nobody on the face of the globe seemed particularly happy. I was far less than happy. I was drinking more, sleeping less, sinking deeper into despondency.

'You're working too hard,' Lord Stoppard told me in Bombay. 'Nobody should stay in the Orient too long at any time. I suggest a vacation for you. Yes. Yes. An extended stay in Europe. Why don't you go home to England? Refresh the old batteries, as they say. Things will look better.'

Two hours later I was packing my bags and arranging my passage west.

Two months later I was in Paris. Three hours after I'd settled my duffle in a side-street *pension*, I strode in haste to prowl the Rue de Varennes.

I stood in that mauve twilight of the first night, partially concealed in shadows under horse-chestnut trees, at a long angle across from the Convent of the Sacred Heart. Those aged walls and spires and vine-bearded buildings where Oriana lived caught the last of the sun in long, angular, saffron planes and shafts. Around them the shadows deepened and over it all hung a forbidding and monastic silence.

I told myself I did not hope to actually meet Oriana. This asked too much of capricious gods. If I were just permitted to glimpse her, it would be enough. It would show me again how young she was – even now when she was over twenty. It would reinforce my first honest instincts that any involvement between Oriana and myself was improper, inappropriate, impossible and in many minds of the moment, unthinkable. All right. I agreed with that.

Yes, I told myself, if I simply saw her – a young girl giggling among other young girls – my heart and my mind

would be purged of her, and I would be free. And freedom, I told myself, was what I really wanted. I knew I could never have Oriana, but this living with her always in my heart, was intolerable. I would be free. Free to drink without finding her lovely face in the shimmering bottom of every glass, free to dream without waking up empty-bellied and dissatisfied.

I loitered along the walk across that quiet street from the convent. A few nuns went hurrying into the iron gated walks, returning from urgent missions. I saw a student, slender and fresh-faced in her prim convent uniform and I thought how Oriana must have despised its starchy formality. The gate opened and two sedate, uniformed young women emerged.

I edged as closely to the kerb as possible, peering through the gathering dusk. Neither young woman was Oriana. I tried to leave as vespers sounded and the supper-hour darkness smoked along the silent street. It was not so easy to tear myself away. I had been in Shanghai, Bombay, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur. I had existed three years in exile. This was as near to Oriana as I had been in all those lonely months.

She was across that street from me, at arms length, barred from me by stone walls, customs, convent rules, my own failing sense of reason, but she was there.

In the next three days, I haunted that street. I stayed each night until lights appeared in those deeply inset upstairs dormitory windows. I got to know the very trees, the shrubs, the house numbers, the dry squeal of gate hinges in that quiet street. I saw girls from the school, singly and in groups, hurrying about their affairs. Though I often became tense and expectant at the first glimpse of a slender form, of dark brown hair, I didn't see Oriana. It was never Oriana who came through that gate. And even if it had been, from this remote adjacency, all the way across the avenue, my vigil was much like watching for a distant boat across a dark and empty night sea.

I told myself to quit this post, to find a new and more appropriate star to follow. But all those weeks hurrying across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope, I had dreamed ahead to the moment when I would encounter

her again, even briefly. It seemed to me that I could set right something that was badly wrong between us if I could see Oriana in person, for a little while. I asked no more. I wanted only to reassure myself that she was all right, that she was happy, that she no longer hated me so fiercely and so blindly. And so I stood across that dark thoroughfare watching for her.

I don't know how long I'd have stood rooted to that lonely picket across from the convent, watching that school, my heart and my hopes sinking, but one morning I read in a newspaper that Vicomte Ferdinand De Lesseps had returned to Paris.

My heart quickened. I continued reading avidly. De Lesseps was in the city to appear before stockholders in the *Compagnie Universelle* in a meeting at the Hotel Crillon.

I felt a rising sense of excitement. I could visit De Lesseps again and learn the status of his canal project three years after the tornado and explosions at Ismailia; I could inquire about our mutual friends, about his engineers whom I'd come to know well – about Ducelle – and finally about Ducelle's daughter. I could elicit the information I so badly wanted without revealing my callow desperation.

I did not go into the Rue de Varennes that day. I prowled my apartment and waited impatiently for nightfall and the hour of the conference at the Hotel Crillon. There was small hope that anything positive would come of it, and yet there was the chance that Oriana herself – if she were excused from the convent – might attend that meeting to be for a little while within the orbit of her idol De Lesseps.

Somehow, I felt already nearer Oriana than before.

# XIV

THE UNIVERSAL COMPANY'S stockholders' meeting was passionate pandemonium. It was stormy, loud and raucous as soon as three or more Parisians gathered in the converted ballroom of the Hotel Crillon. The meeting was a disarray of confusion and ferment as only a convergence of emotional Frenchmen can be.

I slipped into the rear row of straight-backed chairs in the lecture area which glowed with gaslit chandelier and wall-lights and was arranged with raised dais, lectern and blackboard. I sat down, as inconspicuously as possible, with the strange sense that anyone could look at me and see that I was not only not French, I was certainly not a stockholder in the *Compagnie Universelle*.

Tension made me sweat. I searched the faces of the gathering assembly, looking for one face. I told myself that upon De Lesseps' return to Paris, surely Oriana would come in all haste to see him – unless of course she had changed more in three years than I could credit. In ways I hoped she had changed. In others, I was afraid she might have.

I sat and sweated.

The Chairman of the Stockholders Committee, a stout Gallic gentleman with mutton-chop beard and thick brows, banged loudly with his gavel, bringing the meeting to order.

Vicomte De Lesseps entered then from a side door, accompanied by M Arles Dufore, E P de Monchy, of Amsterdam, President of the Canal Commission, G de Clerq, Secretary to the Commercial Company, F W Conrad, President of the International Commission on the Suez Canal and a man I recognised to be De Lesseps' son Charles. Charles looked almost as old as his father, but harassed and without his parent's vigour, enthusiasm or arrogance.

I felt the charge of electric excitement course through me, with faint hackles standing across the nape of my neck, mostly in awe and admiration of De Lesseps' showmanship. These people were already screaming that the whole canal project was ill-conceived, badly managed and poorly implemented. And yet De Lesseps strode among them as if indeed he were the Lion of Suez and not a bedevilled man who may well be on his way to bankruptcy and prison.

He knew how to make an impression. He surrounded himself with distinguished men who convoyed him to his place. A whisper leaped through the room followed by a wave of silence.

I gazed in awe and disbelief at the ageing man on that podium. He looked younger, more vigorous and self-assured than he had the first time I met him over thirteen years earlier, before he'd begun this prolonged descent into hell. He still looked like a giant among men. It was a charismatic effect he somehow produced from within himself where very likely he believed he *was* a giant among men.

Here he was, facing his enemies, Daniel at the gate of the lions' den, about to be sacrificed to the howling mob, and yet he sat quietly, chatting and smiling with the men beside him.

I shrugged. Why should he fear a room full of men who faced ruin if he failed, and might be rich if he succeeded against all the odds, the obstacles, all the estimates of learned men over 2,000 years and accumulated negative technical reports and surveys of centuries? He was not only a builder, he was a street fighter – Good Lord, he'd proved that in Madrid thirty-odd years ago – as well as promoter and statesman. By now, I knew that to whatever he did, he brought the strength, energy and tenacity of twenty men.

He looked as if he thrived on tension and trouble. His salt-and-pepper hair remained healthy and full, precisely parted, neatly trimmed. Heavy gray brows bushed above direct dark eyes and large nose. A carefully manicured moustache accented that vigour and drive evident in his round and remarkably unlined face.

Of course, this battle was nothing new to him. De Lesseps

had forever operated in the centre of controversy, verbal combat and even armed conflict.

I sighed heavily and turned away, searching the rear entrances and the other back seats in the ballroom. My heart sank. Oriana was not there. Very likely she couldn't have got permission to leave the convent at this hour on such a mission. I felt the emptiness spread in the pit of my belly.

The Chairman rapped with his gavel and introduced De Lesseps to a smattering of applause and some pointedly and tensely undemonstrative silence. I'd anticipated wilder hostility. A lesser man, as controversial as De Lesseps, may have had to endure those infamous, strident, mocking whistles typical of disapproving French audiences, but here tonight those who were brave enough to demonstrate their animosity towards him, manifested it only in chilled silence.

Despite the unenthusiastic reception, the almost intangible chill in the atmosphere, De Lesseps was unfailingly self-assured and composed on that dais. He began by saying he was pleased to report that work on the canal was proceeding well, taking shape and form in that distant isthmus where it was destined soon to reaffirm the mid-east position as the centre of the world, a place of traffic and profit and international reward. There were a few hisses.

De Lesseps smiled and held up his thick hand, palm outward. 'No. We are not on schedule, but we are not seriously – not fatally – behind it. I see no reason to doubt, despite doomsayers and detractors, completion of this magnificent canal project in 1868. Gentlemen, the first great ships *shall* sail through that canal next year. You have my word on that.'

These words won him no vote of confidence. Someone in the audience called out scathingly, 'Is that true, sir? Or isn't it near the *truth* to say that your project has *never* been on schedule, that you are now years behind your first estimates, that costs have doubled and tripled, that even you – privately – admit the canal project is a hopeless involvement and will never be completed – and even if it is completed, it will never actually be put into operation?'

'No, *m'sieur*, that is not true. None of that is true.'

'Do you tell us seriously that costs have not doubled your estimates?' the speaker raged, refusing to relinquish the floor. He was vociferously encouraged and supported. People screamed at the tops of their voices; they yelled obscenities as only true Gauls can. Each time De Lesseps tried to answer, this only triggered a renewed opposition and tumult.

Finally, he simply stood there and smiled benignly, waiting for the frenzy to subside. At last they grew tensely quiet, waiting only to erupt again.

He spoke in a gentle tone, yet one which carried to the rear of the room and displayed not one trace of uncertainty. 'I understand your concern. There are among us here men who face ruin if the canal project were to fail. Gentlemen, it will not fail.' They started to yell again, but his raised hand silenced them. 'Let me address your most anxious questions. First, are we facing costs that are double those published in our first estimates?'

'You know damned well you are, *M'sieur*. No lying, no juggling of figures will ever conceal this.'

De Lesseps' face flushed faintly red, but he smiled. 'Costs have doubled over original estimates for one very simple reason, gentlemen. These original cost estimates were made, dear friends, not last week, or last month, or a year ago, but they were made in 1854, to reflect costs current in 1854.'

Some of the tension dissipated just slightly; this was a reasonable fact none could dispute. De Lesseps smiled down upon them and continued.

'It is now, I need hardly remind you anxious and impatient stockholders, late in 1867. We have not in these thirteen years had the luxury of more than one year's full capitalisation. We have worked day to day – and sometimes it is hard to work, gentlemen, when you are on your knees praying. Your work suffers when you are in Paris, and London and Amsterdam trying to sell the merits of a project which should be brilliantly clear to the most retarded mind. We have been forced, down in Suez, to wait, to delay, to extemporise, as prices soared on world markets because of wars here in Europe, civil insurrection in the United States

persisting over four years, and brushfire-encounters all around us in the East.

'None of this has been of our making, and yet every event has affected us adversely. We have worked between the formidable obstacles presented by the Supreme Porte of Turkey. And yet even he was only our visible enemy. We found that the representative of Her Majesty's English government, Lord Stafford, had made powerful secret threats against Turkey unless she acted as the British directed. England is not the only villain in that piece, either. Our government here in Paris has ordered the French ambassador out there to maintain a scrupulous silence, and to offer no resistance to English interference in Constantinople. We work against the expressed wishes of outside governments, we work without the co-operation of our own emperor. We work under that constant and costly hostility.

'In 1856, when work finally began, we had, thanks to a decree from Mohammed Said, the right to hire workmen – mostly Egyptian – at two-thirds less than wages paid in similar enterprises. This was done in a patriotic Egyptian effort to suffer immediate sacrifice for long-run advantage. It was farsighted and brilliant. We appreciated it, but on our own initiative we exceeded this base pay by one-third more than these people received on any other project in Egypt.

'Had we received the co-operation and capitalisation I have always felt we deserved, the canal might well be in operation as I stand here before you. But the faint-hearted and the rigid-minded have prevailed against us. And costs have mounted. Today we pay many times that fair basic salary of 1856. In addition we provide food, shelter and free medical attendance for our workers, and we pay a pension to the sick and wounded.'

There was a tentative smattering of applause which swelled mildly in volume. But before De Lesseps could continue, another stockholder shouted, 'Where lack of money and accident have not stopped you, has not religious and ethnic opposition in Egypt totally disrupted progress?'

My face burned, and I remembered how I had suggested that religious opposition might well be the way to defeat De

Lesseps without violence on the isthmus. I sank slightly on my tailbone in the chair.

Voices rose across the ballroom. The chairman banged his gavel. These people wanted to trust the Lion of Suez, but all of them knew that costs at the Isthmus were ruinous, that the Second Empire, a government administration, even national fiscal security, were at stake here. Not even a man of De Lesseps' stature and conviction could be permitted to pass over such serious contingencies.

De Lesseps shocked them into silence. He made no further effort to paint over the gloomy conditions at present prevailing on the project. He said he had not come to hide facts from them, but to assess their problems and to ask them to help him find answers that would permit the speedy final construction of the canal.

The audience fell silent. For the first time publicly, De Lesseps admitted a potentially magnificent project was in peril, a jeopardy which might destroy the government of a nation bled white by wars and colonisation.

Then he spoke in quiet confidence. 'There are answers, and I am here in Paris to find those answers. We have proved ourselves right against the wisdom of the ages regarding the impossibility of our canal. We have proved that the opposite is true of all accepted wisdoms and logics which formerly were accepted universally as fact. We were told from all sides that such and such facts had to be true. They had been acknowledged as gospel by the most brilliant minds for thousands of years. Well, we are succeeding because we discarded all the old conceptions which had caused the Suez project to be abandoned as impractical, expensive, even impossible from Darius to Omar to Napoleon I; to them all, the canal project was a dream that could not come true. But we are making it come true. I ask not for your indulgence, but for your patience. I ask for your support. I shall tonight go to the highest echelons of this government and demand the co-operation we should have enjoyed for thirteen years because it was spelled out for us in agreements. I entreat you to support us, with your francs and your prayers. Our greatest expenses come from the unforeseeable, catastrophic acts of God, mindless

opposition of unseeing men and governments. But we remain the same dedicated men who embarked on this glorious accomplishment in 1854. Our goals are honourable, international in scope, our ends justifiable. Our problems are enormous, but not insurmountable. We shall get the support we require and we shall succeed.

'Gentlemen, in 1854, when Mohammed Said signed the concessions inaugurating a Universal Company to build that canal across the Isthmus of Suez, the English Agent present asked him how he expected that work ever to be accomplished. The Viceroy replied then that our company was *named* Universal, the benefits would be universal, the need universal, so that all nations would be invited to participate. And so in this year of 1867, we ask your continued faith, your prayers, your capital. We must not fail this close to completion. With your help, we cannot fail.'

Though undeniable and rigid opposition and tension persisted, applause for De Lesseps was warmer and far more sustained than when he was introduced. I helped to ensure this through sheer physical display of enthusiasm. My appreciation was for his persuasiveness. He had said they had proved the wisdom of the ages wrong, they would prove the doomsayers wrong. That was showmanship and I applauded it. I stood up, applauding in what proved to be almost a one-man ovation. Gradually a few others hesitantly joined me and at last only a handful refused to applaud at all.

In the bustle and confusion after the chairman declared the meeting to be adjourned, I had little hope of getting near De Lesseps, much less of making my presence known to him. Surrounded by cohorts and detractors, De Lesseps left the podium and forced his way towards the doors through which he had entered.

I stood in the midst of that confusion and admitted that I admired this great arrogant giant of a man. He was bigger than life. He did dream dreams other men could not even fantasise. Those days I had spent in his company in Alexandria, at Suez and at Ismailia flooded back across my

mind, and in all of them Oriana's presence burned fiercely.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to look into the harried face of Charles De Lesseps. 'Are you M Tony Hamilton?' he asked.

'I am.' I extended my hand, smiling, and Charles shook it warmly.

'My father was certain he recognised you as the man who stood and applauded. He said it was very like you. He is most anxious to have you join our party.'

The De Lesseps suite on the fourth floor was loud, with emotional Gallic voices raised one against another. Most of the Louis XIV furniture had been shoved against the wall to make room for the crush of unhappy stockholders.

Charles De Lesseps and I entered the crowded room, made almost bearable by large, battery-operated fans which whirled slowly on the ceiling. A buffet and wet bar had been set up, attended by Crillion room-service staff members. The place was ignored by the excited men. Only Charles and I sampled its elegant gourmet offerings of caviar, *pâté de foie gras*, brie cheeses and stuffed Italian olives, with grapes and scallions.

Vicomte De Lesseps was surrounded by men who obviously had been waiting for months, perhaps years, for this opportunity to confront him with their charges and complaints. These were grim-visaged investors, mostly; they had briefly succumbed to De Lesseps' extraordinary charm in the ballroom. Now, with the return of reason, they found their basic questions unanswered and obviously, they feared, unanswerable.

Sipping cognac and consuming delicious hot *hors-d'oeuvres* with relish, I watched De Lesseps from across the loud, congested room. I had seen him exhausted many times before, but I had never seen him show exhaustion. It was as if such admission would expose a vulnerable crack in his vaunted impenetrable armour. Or, perhaps as I'd thought from the first, he was less than human. At least, I knew him to be obsessed; perhaps he didn't get tired the way ordinary men did. Or maybe this whole business was an act. Maybe he was always on-stage, presenting the front he thought the world wanted to see. At

any rate, he remained unflappable over there, despite the shouted charges of overt criminality, made directly to his face. Knowing his savage and hair-trigger temper, I wondered how long he would accommodate such personal attacks. His attitude appeared to be almost paternalistic, as if all hostility against him grew from misunderstanding. When these men understood they would approve, they would applaud, they would support him.

'I'm afraid this is as close as we can get to Father, at the moment,' Charles said.

'This is as close as we need to get in the present circumstances. It's much safer here with the champagne.' I had not realised I was so hungry; I had not eaten regularly since I returned to Europe; there had been something else on my mind, something which made the thought of food revolting. I ate heartily now, aware that Charles was smiling oddly as he watched me. 'I have no desire to get involved in that shouting match.'

Charles smiled and nodded. 'There is a lot of hostility over there.'

'So thick you could cut it with a knife . . . It's thicker even than the bad air trapped in this room.'

'Perhaps it's part of it.'

'I know you think I'm eating like a panhandler.'

'We want you to enjoy yourself.'

'It's just that I haven't eaten regularly – haven't wanted to . . . I've been busy . . . suddenly here, it catches up with me.'

'There is no need for apology, m'sieur.'

I watched the conflict unfold across the room; the faces and the voices altered, the complaints and charges did not, or if at all, only slightly. It was as if each man were bound up in his own rages, and he did not hear what went on around him. A complainant would stand second in line, endure an entire shouting match, step forward when it was his turn and ask the same question. I would have lost my temper long before this, but De Lesseps went on smiling; his face said he loved all these men and was anxious to speak personally with each of them. I knew damn well this couldn't be true.

'Perhaps I should come back tomorrow,' I suggested. 'It would be far more convenient for your father.'

'He anticipated a crush like this. He asked especially that you stay, if you will. He is most anxious to see you alone, after the crowd has dispersed.'

I nodded, grinned at him, and selected another thumb-sized sandwich.

It was well after ten o'clock before the mob departed; when there were fewer than half a dozen men in the room and most of these friendly associates in the Universal Company, Charles announced that his father had an appointment with the Emperor's family in the Tuileries at eleven. De Lesseps' colleagues wished him Godspeed and good luck. A few admonished him to stand firm against Louis Napoleon. 'You are a far more popular figure in France now than your Emperor,' de Monchy told him.

'Even I?' De Lesseps raised a quizzical brow.

'You are revered, Fernando, among those who truly know what you have endured to complete France's most magnificent achievement.'

The two men embraced; de Monchy and his people departed, and Vicomte De Lesseps hurried across the room to where his son and I stood together beside the buffet.

He put out his arms and hugged me. 'Thank God you didn't leave,' he said. 'Are they treating you well?'

'I've never eaten better,' I said.

'The reason I asked you to stay after the others have gone,' De Lesseps said. 'I want you to accompany me to the palace for a royal command dinner at eleven.'

'Accompany you? But didn't I understand that you are conferring tonight with the highest echelons of the French government?'

He gave me his warmest smile. 'Exactly.'

'On delicate matters concerning canal concessions which have not been honoured?'

'You listened to my speech.'

'To every word.'

'Perhaps you are the only one who really listened. You and Charles. And you are right – we are dining and conferring on the very highest royal level. The very highest.'

'But, Vicomte, you don't want me – an Englishman – along in a conference with the Emperor and his ministers.'

Now De Lesseps laughed aloud and his son smiled too. 'My dear boy. Who said anything about Napoleon III and his lackeys? I said the highest governmental echelons. In France, I can tell you, that no longer means Louis Napoleon.'

# XV

THE EMPRESS EUGENIE was still radiantly beautiful at forty-one. Forty-one? Could this lovely creature who had battered male hearts from Madrid north to London and east to Paris, be forty-one years old? What had happened to reason? What had happened to time, that it should race past like this so swiftly, erratically and mindlessly?

Still, time in its haste, had touched Eugenie only lightly, almost like the glancing brush of *les ailes de papillon*.

Though De Lesseps and I were some minutes late – racing in a horse-drawn hack to the Empress's private suite in the Tuileries – her gracious majesty kept us cooling our heels in an anteroom for almost twenty minutes.

When finally she appeared, the waiting was forgotten, the royal negligence forgiven, the promise renewed. Seeing her again after such a long time, I recalled my early vow, ancient and rusty by now, to make any sacrifice, accomplish any goal, clear any barrier, for the pleasure of one night in her bed. Such a probability seemed far less than likely any more; my dream was as old as I was, and she had ascended steadily and irrecoverably further and further from my narrowing orbit. Even my once erotic and heated dreams of her had melted like clouds before the wind.

At last a liveried servant opened an inner chamber door and held it wide. Eugenie appeared in it, like some hurting memory from the past. Forty-one? Ah, no. She looked more like twenty-nine, which is no age at all. She looked ageless, untouched by time, except for the changeling shadows I discovered burried in her lovely eyes, as if by now she were finally fretted by old doubts and lost faiths. The price she'd paid for her exalted position was high; she had not escaped

unscathed, though one did have to probe deeply to find the faint scars and hidden weals.

As we had waited I had sensed De Lesseps' desperation. I knew instinctively the precarious position in which he found himself, and I remembered it had been at least three years ago that he'd admitted to invoking Eugenie's name without her knowledge or consent. Obviously this ploy, along with all the other questionable actions he had taken to keep his project crawling painfully forward, was catching up with him. And yet there seemed to be a certain confidence about him; he still believed that once he presented his case to his cousin Eugenie, she would find some way to support him despite Louis Napoleon's repudiation. Still, he had looked like a man on a tightrope until that door opened and Eugenie stood there.

I heard his deep sigh, I glimpsed from the corner of my eye the warm approval of his smile. Fifteen years his mistress! Perhaps he had reason to hope, and clearly he still liked what he saw.

What was there to dislike? It was suddenly as if the highly polished flooring came alive with the reflected glow of hundreds of candles that sparkled about the cake-icing walls. The rows of gilded mirrors reflected and enhanced and emphasised her delicate beauty in this perfect setting.

Poised in the doorway, smiling faintly, she allowed us to enjoy the heady loveliness of her, though I did see a faint shock in her eyes at the sight of me. She had expected her dear Fernando to come alone to her apartment. Behind her, from a large sitting room came subdued music of violins and viols, a string ensemble from musicians half-concealed behind hot-house palms. One had the feeling it was late dusk and not almost midnight.

Eugenie touched at her ceramic-glaze bosom with delicate porcelain-like fingers. Her gown was cut in *décolleté exceptionnel*, her elegant breasts glowing warmly in the serene candlelight. She moved lightly towards us, her hand extended towards De Lesseps. As could be expected, she had calculated her entrance precisely for maximum effect. As she paused again, just out of the Vicomte's reach, he was forced to step forward and sink to his knee, taking her

fingers and pressing his moustached mouth to the back of her hand.

In the faint and pregnant silence, their eyes clashed and held, and I watched them, entranced. It was hard to believe there was at least twenty-two years difference in their ages, that De Lesseps was sixty-three years old; most men his age doddered, disremembered and even drooled. One saw how valiantly Fernando De Lesseps had fought off age. He looked young enough to be her lover, even tonight, as harried as he was, as fatigued as he must be after having faced those accusing, yelling men at the Hotel Crillon.

Eugenie led us into a large sitting room where a dining table had been set up, with flowers and candelabra. After an initial awkwardness, and Eugenie's tenseness at finding me as her guest, we did relax in the staggering opulence of it all. I was particularly impressed by the massive elegance, the architectural grandeur and the quiet efficiency of Eugenie's palace staff. As if by magic, the table was set for three, while I was still reacting to the exquisite furnishings, the hand-painted wallpaper, featuring pastel scenes of eighteenth century Paris and the court of Louis XV, the intricate carving of woodwork and mouldings, the paints of masters, the glitter of chandeliers.

The dinner which appeared as if by its own *legerdemain* overwhelmed me, and when I recall it, still boggles the staid English part of my mind. With uniformed servants at each chair, and maids to support their logistics, delicacies were spread before us.

'I know you must be starved, dear Fernando,' Eugenie said. She made a little *moue* with her lovely lips.

He smiled upon her and replied with that gallantry I knew by now to be part of his repertoire. 'I have not been hungry since I learned I was to be your dinner guest this evening, my dearest Eugenie.'

She tilted her head slightly and did not smile. Instead, she glanced towards me, as if ceding me half her mind and none of her heart. 'Fernando has been a naughty boy, Tony. Especially naughty. He has misbehaved badly – very badly indeed. He thinks I won't chide him with you here as company.'

'Of course you won't,' De Lesseps said. 'You'll be too

happy to see Tony again. As I was. When I saw him tonight at the Hotel Crillon, I knew you would want me to bring him along.'

'Of course you're always welcome,' Eugenie said, as if she'd already forgotten my presence.

I laughed. 'I'm afraid I still have not earned the right to more than a passing glance from her majesty.'

Eugenie brought her mind back from somewhere and glanced towards me, brow tilted. My God, that complexion. Not the faintest crow's feet lines showed about her eyes. Her mouth was as soft and sensuous as ever, her cheeks like new alabaster. 'Why what do you mean, Tony? You've always been one of my favourite people.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But your majesty has long-since forgotten, as I never shall, what you told me in London a long time ago. Your majesty is interested only in men who move the world, and as yet, I have not been able to stir even a small corner of it.'

Eugenie laughed. 'I had many foolish ideas when I was a girl.'

The courses of the meal passed before us in a haze – *hors d'oeuvres* of kale-stuffed pigeon served in silver casseroles, a rich bouillabaisse. Roast suckling pig, chicken livers and tripe loaded this table as if this were a state meal and not a late evening snack, a prelude to something far more important.

I could see that De Lesseps' mind was preoccupied with his canal, even in the exotic presence of the century's most exciting empress. He scarcely touched his food; he smiled vacantly when Eugenie flirted with him, but it was clearly evident that he had hoped for more. He needed her support and backing fiercely. He needed her to discuss the problems he faced in the Suez, but she was flighty, flirtatious, shallow. It was almost as if she were teasing him.

'If we are to complete the canal by next year,' De Lesseps began once during a lull in Eugenie's chatter and gossip, 'we must – '

'Oh, you must get that dreadful ditch finished and in operation,' Eugenie said. 'Prosper Mérimée brought Giuseppe Verdi to dinner one night, and we discussed the

opera Verdi is composing to celebrate the opening of the canal.' She sighed and shrugged. 'Prosper is getting so old, Fernando. Why don't you teach him how to stay young as you have?'

He took her hand. 'Perhaps Prosper doesn't have as much to live for any more, my dear, as I do.'

She laughed and slapped his wrist with her fan. 'It won't help you any to flirt with me, either, Fernando. I know all your tricks . . . Would you like to hear what Verdi had to say about his opera? He is going to call it "Aida". He said the scenario was first suggested to him in a letter from Camille du Locle. Camille, of course, got the idea from the noted French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette.

'According to Verdi, who is a very uncharming little Italian, even shorter than poor Louis, Mariette is supposed to have taken the plot of "Aida" from a true incident which came to light in the course of his archaeological explorations at Memphis. Aida, the daughter of Amonasro, King of Ethiopia, was held in Memphis as a slave. Her father tried to save her but was defeated by the Egyptian army under Radames. Radames is then named successor to the throne of Egypt and awarded the hand of the Princess Amneris. But Radames loves Aida. Aida's father, in hiding in Memphis, forces her to secure information from Radames on movements of the Egyptian army. When Aida and Amonasro reveal their true identities and escape to join the Ethiopians, Radames realises he had unwittingly betrayed his country. He gives up his sword and is condemned to be buried alive as a traitor and Aida returns to Memphis to share his fate. Isn't that lovely? Isn't that beautiful? And so relevant to the events to happen when the canal opens at Port Said. Don't you think it lovely, Fernando?'

De Lesseps laughed. 'I cannot help thinking we could have used the 80,000 francs the Khedive Ismail paid Verdi for this empty legend with music.'

'Oh, Fernando. I get so impatient with you. Sometimes you are actually *bourgeois*. Unforgivably.'

'I have so many important things for her highness to forgive in me, I cannot weep over my lack of appreciation of opera.'

Eugenie glanced towards me. 'Oh, Tony, what shall I do with him?'

'Why don't you help me?' De Lesseps inquired in a blunt tone.

The Empress behaved as if her cousin had not spoken at all. She opened her mouth to speak, to change the subject, but he spoke again in that flat, hard tone. 'You know, Eugenie, that Louis Napoleon has withdrawn all support from me and the canal project.'

She waved her arm impatiently. 'You must not blame poor Louis, Fernando. He is beset with problems you would not even understand. Louis is going to war over Alsace and Lorraine. There is no way to avoid the conflict. This means that France cannot afford to antagonise the Turks further. Any more than we can afford to pour more francs into your ditch which must be used in the national security.'

De Lesseps exhaled heavily and spoke in a sharp, curt tone. 'Well, at least you have enlightened me on one score. I wondered where the Sultan of Turkey suddenly found the bravery to block us openly at every turn. So he knows the French are abandoning me, does he? That's why he has had the gall to demand payment of twenty million francs. He has said that unless the Universal Company pays him twenty million francs immediately, he threatens to rescind the commission to build. He says he has the right because of delays in construction and overruns in time and money. I had seen this naturally as a British intervention. I knew the Supreme Porte had not come up with this paralysing demand on his own. But what I didn't know was that the French government had given him its tacit approval to act against us.'

'Oh, Fernando, don't be tiresome, you know better than that.'

'I know only what is happening to me.'

She shrugged her lovely shoulders. 'Then you must relax. You must learn to relax as you once did. You were not totally wrapped up in state affairs. You accomplished great things without giving it twenty-four hours of every day.'

'I had your majesty's blessings, her support and her financial backing,' he reminded her.

'Well, things have changed, Fernando . . .' She brushed all this aside. 'As you have changed. You have neglected me. Shamefully. Perhaps you have rejected me entirely. Perhaps because I am old and no longer beautiful.'

This was so ridiculous that I laughed, as did De Lesseps, and even the Empress herself. She waved her hand. 'I seek some reason why you treat me so shabbily, Fernando. I can think only that you have rejected me.'

He laughed again. 'Rejected? I didn't know such a word existed in your vocabulary, highness.'

Eugenie pouted, not prettily, beautifully. She achieved with a pout what another woman might with her most charming smile. 'Even beautiful women are human, Fernando. We are very human. We hurt easily – perhaps far more easily than women who are often treated – casually, even callously . . . I'm not accustomed to being treated callously – not even by a preoccupied cousin who no longer cares for me – '

'My dearest Empress, I shall go into my grave with your name graven upon my lips,' De Lesseps said. 'You know this. Better than anyone, you know this.'

'Then you will want to please me,' she said. There was a faint threat in her tone. I found her lovelier than ever, but shallower, too, and I saw the determined set of her little chin, the hard taut line of her mouth, the way her eyes narrowed thin sometimes, even when she smiled . . . as now.

'Of course I want to please you,' De Lesseps said. 'I always want to please your highness.'

'It is Eugenie I want you to please, Fernando. Your unhappy cousin Eugenie.'

'Anything, Eugenie, you know that. Anything.' I felt the hackles rising at the nape of my neck at the tension suddenly crackling in this room. But as I grew more uncomfortable, De Lesseps seemed to relax and even to grow expansive. He turned, smiling, and included me in the conversation, much to my regret. 'My cousin Eugenie is extremely angry with me. I had no idea how furious she was with me until this moment.'

'Don't patronise me, Fernando,' Eugenie said. 'Don't you dare patronise me.'

'The last thought in my head, my dearest one,' he said. 'I wanted only to assure Tony that you are not only totally feminine – as you are proving to us tonight. Flirting with me like this. Pretending there is even a place for me in your busy world. I ask you, Tony, did not I say we dined with the highest echelons of French government tonight at eleven? Did I not? Not only has Eugenie's beauty and charm added splendour and humanity to the imperial court, not only has she borne a son, the Prince Imperial, but she exercises the greatest influence on political affairs in France. On three separate occasions, she has acted as regent – and each time with success that dimmed the glory and ability of Louis Napoleon upon his return.'

She shook her head impatiently. 'I'm tired of being regent, or Empress, or queen, or anything tonight, Fernando . . . That is why I hoped you would park your damned ditch outside my suite when you came here tonight.'

'I am your slave, highness, you know that.' But I saw that De Lesseps winced as he said this. He must have felt the pressures suddenly staggering him as he tried to smile and play games with her majesty, the Empress.

To my total surprise, Eugenie clapped her hands. The food and table were removed. She gave a laugh and said, 'I knew you would indulge me, Fernando . . . That's why I've always loved you so . . . You make me feel like a young girl . . . A spoiled young girl . . . You don't know how badly I need that right now.'

She clapped her hands again and the string ensemble struck up a lively meringue. 'I've had Worth bring some new fashions to show us, Fernando. The very latest styles. I knew you would want to be the first to see them. And I so badly wanted your opinion on them all.'

I could not believe it was happening at such a moment of deep crisis for De Lesseps, and yet I sat numbly in my brocaded Louis XIV chair and watched an exhibition of advance fashions in feminine styles paraded before us. Each young woman modelling creations of the internationally renowned Charles Frederick Worth was lovelier than her sister who preceded her. They were breathtakingly beautiful

mannequins, made stunning by exotic cosmetics, hair styling, and silken clothing. Not only were next year's high fashions displayed, but there was more than a little eroticism involved, as well. Young women appeared topless, in chemise, and silken underthings, in hosiery only, in every state of dress and undress. I saw how much more Empress Eugenie had planned for her cousin than a friendly late dinner. She was still deeply intrigued by him; after fifteen years she was still using every wile to excite and arouse him and bring him back to her.

I became aware that Eugenie was talking. Though all this display of silks, satins, voiles, lace and sable was for De Lesseps' benefit, she now found it expedient to ignore him and to address her honeyed tones towards me as each mannequin paraded past us.

'All this beauty in fashion – for men as well as women – came about only with the Revolution. When Louis' grandfather came to power, all previously prevailing styles were discarded. Brilliant plumes and rich fabrics were now permissible for women and courtiers.

'Of course, the artist Jacques Louis David revived the Classic Greek dress and *décor* which was for years accepted and even enforced as fashion law. Possibly because tiny little Josephine, with her dark curly hair, found its silhouettes so becoming, it became the fashion rule for many years. Sheer white cotton with high waistline, short sleeves and a straight skirt worn over tights, with low shoes like ballet slippers. The hair – to match Josephine's – was arranged in short ringlets. Over this they wore a bonnet, trimmed with plumes.

'That was, at least, when the corset was abandoned, thank God! Do you know, Tony, that reputable medical doctors actually attributed an epidemic of tuberculosis to the fact that fashion-conscious women wore this flimsy dress the year round? My God, aren't men stupid sometimes?'

'Well! I'm pleased we've returned the conversation to me and my problems,' De Lesseps said with a confident smile that could not possibly have been more than skin deep under the circumstances.

'Oh, but we haven't, my dear cousin,' Eugenie answered. She tilted her lovely head and those eyes narrowed. 'This time I was speaking of men generally – I had neither you nor Louis in mind – '

'I can only pray then that I shall return to your heart – and mind – soon,' De Lesseps said in a sharper tone.

She drew in a sharp breath. 'Oh, Fernando, hush and look at the beautiful clothes. Thank God, Worth came to Paris from London in 1840 and had by 1858 changed the fashion world. Isn't Worth incredible? His taste is impeccable. He was the first to show a collection of gowns on living mannequins. If only he weren't such a bully. The way he tells women what they may and may not wear. To go against him is fatal . . . Like you, dear Fernando, the Englishman Worth is a terrible bully.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Highness,' he answered in a totally disinterested voice, edged in irony.

She gave him her cruellest smile. She was expert at using a bright, thin-bladed smile as medieval adversaries used the misericord in combat – for the final 'mercy' stroke. 'Oh, I forgive Worth,' she said. 'After all, he has achieved so much. He has moved French industry many years ahead – '

'Thanks to you becoming his client,' De Lesseps said.

She shrugged. 'It was the least I could do. Not only to aid French industry which slumped badly, but to win affection of our subjects who were totally hostile at the time.'

'Still, if I had such support as you afforded Worth, I too could move heaven *and* earth.'

'When you design a crinoline gown – like that one – then you shall have my undying support, all my heart and soul,' she said in casual dismissal.

I felt chilled. I realised that though the canal project had to have its place of priority in Empress Eugenie's mind, her fashions, her dresses, her cosmetics held her interest equally with that engineering feat. I did not see how De Lesseps hoped to wring from her the vital and necessary fiscal guarantees that would save him. She existed in a different world from him.

She went on chattering shallowly about the lovely new silks and tulles being turned out from French mills, the huge

profits accruing to the nation, the skirts which were at least eleven yards around so that doors, stairways and settees had to be enlarged to accommodate women's gowns.

At two o'clock that morning that last of Worth's creations was displayed, the last subdued music played from the hidden alcove. I sat, agonised with fatigue, helplessly biting back yawns.

Eugenie seemed as fresh as ever. There were no lines of exhaustion revealed, even about her eyes. She insisted upon hearing De Lesseps' comments on several gowns which were shown a second and third time until she was satisfied with his responses. He did seem to know a great deal about feminine fashions, and he showed excellent taste, but damned little interest. He was bored and he did not try to conceal his boredom from his hostess.

As for Eugenie she took a wicked delight in exploiting his weariness and disinterest; she forced him to bend to her will, and it looked as if this were what she truly wanted of him.

'They're all lovely,' De Lesseps said at last. 'And you are lovely, Cousin. But while we waste time here on frills and trivialities, the greatest engineering achievement of this century languishes in Suez.'

Eugenie stared along her lovely nose at him. 'I hardly believed you would dare to introduce this matter in my presence, Fernando, after the way you have involved me, my position, my name and my credit in its labyrinths of chicanery.'

'I've done only what I've had to do, Highness. And if I mistakenly involved your dear name, it was because whatever I did, whatever I do, is in glorification of that name.'

'Perhaps.' Her mouth twisted with a bitter smile. 'But much of what you have done is criminal. My advisers assure me of this. But, perhaps if we must discuss this delicate matter despite all my efforts to avoid it – '

'I have no wish to avoid the least of my responsibilities, Highness – '

' – despite my efforts to be kind, perhaps you and I had better retire to my study. There is no sense in burdening Tony Hamilton with the matters we have to thrash out.'

'You go right ahead,' I said. I got up and went to the bar where two liveried servants, half-asleep, waited to serve me. 'Please. I'll keep a glass of cognac burning in the window.'

They did retire to the Empress Eugenie's study. They closed the tall, ornate doors behind them. But for a long time their voices carried through the thick oak panelling, raised, strident, accusatory, one against the other. And then, for an incredibly long and breathless time, it was quiet in there. When I had just decided to slip away into the Paris night – if I were permitted to depart this place at this hour without some special dispensation and a palace guide, the door opened and De Lesseps stepped through and closed it behind him.

'I must beg your forgiveness, Tony,' he said. 'I have been requested to remain for the night. A royal command really . . . I think you will be very pleased to know I have won Eugenie over. I'm sure I have. She will support me. She will force Louis Napoleon to support me. The rest of our evening together should be most pleasant. After all, I've always said of my cousin Eugenie, she is an ill wind that blows everybody good.'

I stared at him, faintly shocked because I'd never heard him speak in such bitter disparagement against his cousin. I saw in his face that he was embittered, angered, even enraged, but resigned, too.

'My staying,' he added in a quiet hard voice, 'is a condition of her renewed support.'

Empty-bellied, I nevertheless laughed. 'Is there no sacrifice you would not make for that ditch of yours?'

He gave a Gallic shrug of his thick shoulders. 'None,' he said, with a solemn smile.

I was still empty-bellied when I returned to my modest apartment, made far more modest by the overwhelming magnificence of Empress Eugenie's suite. I kept seeing De Lesseps in Eugenie's bed, that Eden where I longed to commit every original sin in every original manner. But I knew pleasure played a small part in De Lesseps' design. Financial failure of the canal company might topple the

Second Empire, already on the brink of bankruptcy and despised by its subjects.

I exhaled heavily. If De Lesseps managed somehow to delay the collapse of the canal company, he also deferred French anarchy unparallelled since the Revolution. I was sure he knew this; I wondered how much of it Eugenie realised?

I had to laugh emptily. What happened in Eugenie's bed would make or break that canal project in the immediate months ahead. It all depended on that ageing, mangificent old man. Pressures closed in on De Lesseps; his back was against the wall; his last desperate hope depending upon the responses of a tired and ageing body. At the moment, I hardly envied him.

I was barely aware of returning to my apartment. When I opened the door, I saw the hand-delivered note lying, winking up at me from the carpeting where it had been slipped across the sill.

Kneeling unsteadily, my head throbbing, my equilibrium destroyed, I picked up the envelope and tore it open.

My mouth sagged open. It was from Oriana. It was written in a round, bold, girlish hand, and there was about the stationery the faint, elusive scent of her. My throat tightened as I read.

'Instead of standing across the street, staring at the convent, a place where you have no hope of encountering me – if this be your design, and despite a certain immodesty, I can think of no other for your continued presence there, why don't you visit the *Bois de Boulogne* at three tomorrow afternoon? Even if we do not meet, there is much more to see there than in our poor street. Oriana.'

# XVI

I ENTERED THE wide avenue at the entrance of the *Bois de Boulogne* at twenty minutes to three that afternoon, unable to delay any longer. I strode along its bright boxed pathways impatiently. I followed walkways that wound through the *Jardin d'Acclimation*. I passed a small bright open cafe. I went unseeing through the zoo and beside the conservatories. Before me, the long, flowered inclines reached out, bordered wtih ornamental greenery and splashed with delicate tints and bold hues of delicate flowers. Near the end of the terrace, a fountain frothed in the saffron sunlight like tossed silver coins.

I saw nothing, heard little. I had not slept. I had not eaten; I had been neither hungry nor sleepy.

I was barely aware of these luxuriant manicured grounds which extended from the Seine to the ancient fortifications between Neuilly and Boulogne-Billancourt – woodlands, lakes, restaurants and playgrounds all lost in a haze of anxiety, apprehension and anticipation. God help me. I was not forty-two, I was a young boy again. A very young and callow boy.

People passed me, walking slowly on both sides, loitering in the afternoon loveliness. I was only vaguely aware of faces, as I was of leaves, trees, grass and the cries of children.

I returned to the entrance of the park, there to stand waiting, unable to do otherwise. I watched the street, the approaching hansom cabs, searching faces, seeking out convent uniforms, wondering if I would recognise Oriana when I saw her – if I saw her – after all these years.

I waited, I sweated. I felt the faint warmth of the fading sun, a breeze from somewhere, and then, I saw her.

Dear God, I saw her. That beautiful child. I recognised her at once. I stood as if rooted to the walk, aware that the air was redolent with the cloying scent of hothouse plants, that the world around me was strangely silent and remote, the earth beneath my feet insubstantial.

Oriana walked slowly towards me, an odd smile twisting her face. She had never looked lovelier, even in that drab and sombre sack of the convent. She was complete now, total, incredibly lovely as the teenage girl had promised she must be. In that prolonged, violent, shattering instant, I felt the sharp pang of pain, the pound and throb of need, the aching end of despair, the thrill of finding her again, the end of searching.

She paused and then came slowly towards me.

I put out my hands to her, but she remained with her arms at her sides. She did not touch me or allow me to touch her. I saw that she was not alone. Accompanying her was another convent student, a faceless female who giggled and murmured something to Oriana and then dissolved into the walkway, or disappeared in the topiary bushes, or vanished in thin air. I never heard of her again. I never missed her.

When we were alone in the crowded park, Oriana smiled again, uncertainly. Her eyes were pools, large enough to drown in, her lips had all the softness of rain-frothed roses. She was achingly beautiful, and I ached.

'It's been a long time,' I said.

She smiled in that twisted way. 'Oh, I've seen you recently, loitering around the convent like a child molester.'

'My God, Oriana.'

'Oh, I know you're not a child molester. You proved that to me. I only said *like* a child molester. Don't you know you can be arrested hanging around a girls' school like that?'

I tried to smile, failed. 'I didn't care.'

'Obviously, you didn't. It might well adversely affect your diplomatic career.'

'I didn't care about that, either.'

'You have changed, haven't you? You've thrown all care away. Are you still a virgin?'

Again I tried to smile, 'Would you marry me if I weren't?'

'Oh, I'll never marry you anyway. So don't hold back on my account.'

I tried to match her tone. 'I suppose that means you haven't waited for me?'

'That,' she said, 'is none of your business.'

'No. I'm sorry. I was prying. I was jealous.'

'You? Jealous? Surely you haven't changed that much.'

'Must we go on standing here like this?'

'That's up to you.'

'Would you like a – a cup of tea?'

'Yes. I'll have a cup of tea with you. That seems safe enough, doesn't it.'

'Quite safe.'

'And I'd like a croissant.'

'That sounds safe, too.'

Now she almost smiled. 'Why are you in Paris? Except to haunt school grounds?'

'I came looking for you.'

'How sweet of you to say that.'

'It's the truth.'

'I'm no longer the simple little girl you knew at Ismailia, Tony . . . I hear better sweet nothings from schoolboys.'

'I'm sure you do.'

'There you go. Jealous again.'

We sat beneath the bright mushrooming of a café parasol. The table was tiny; our knees brushed and I lunged away, instinctively. She laughed in a soft taunting way. I ordered tea and croissants. We were silent, awkward together, and yet I was where I wanted to be; I wanted nothing more than this. I could look at her across the table; she was with me. The waiter set our order before us. Oriana sipped at her tea, then sat and broke the croissant into precise geometric pieces which wasn't easy with the brittle, flaky crust, and she left them strewn across the blue pattern of her plate.

'My father always loved a cup of tea in the afternoon,' she said. 'It refreshed him, he said.'

'How is your father?'

'Haven't you seen him?'

'Not for a long time. I've not been in Suez for some months.'

Her tongue touched the inside of her cheek. 'I thought it

had been quiet out on the Isthmus. No British-supplied explosives.'

'You'll never forgive me, will you?'

'Probably not. It doesn't matter any more. Drink your tea.'

'Why?'

'You'll need your strength.'

'Do I look that bad?'

'You are very tense. Can't you relax?'

'Obviously not . . . I've fought against coming near you for a long time.'

'You poor dear. And you lost the good fight?'

'It wasn't much of a fight. I was outclassed.'

She stared at me openly across the table. 'You look older.'

'I am older. That's what I tried to tell you three years ago – when you are my age, I'll be sixty.'

She chewed at the flaky crust of her broken croissant. 'I didn't care then. I don't care now.' She moved her shoulders in a faint shrug. 'I care much less now.'

'I'm glad you recovered from your – calf love.'

'Oh, you told me I would.'

'Yes. I didn't know I would be the one infected fatally.'

She laughed. 'Oh, is it fatal?'

'I don't know. A middle-aged man mooning over a young girl. I keep smelling straightjackets and hospitals, and seeing nurses and doctors waiting to certify me. I never believed men died of love. I'm not so sure. It's been more than two years since I've even wanted any other woman.'

'I didn't know a man could wait so long.'

'What do you know about it?'

'What do you think we talk about at the convent? I've even learned how to keep from getting pregnant. It isn't very delicate, but it never fails.'

'Your education is quite complete.'

'Yes. I'm learning everything I can. Some man will be very proud of me.'

'I'm sure he will. Have you – selected anyone yet?'

She shrugged. 'That's none of your business, either.'

'I wish there was somewhere we could go . . . where I could talk to you.'

'You mean kiss me, don't you?'

'Probably.'

'What would we talk about?' she said.

'About you. How lovely you are. How I've missed you. I have missed you. I didn't know I could miss anyone so terribly.'

'Is that all we would do? Talk?'

'Yes. If that's what you want.'

'What I want will probably have nothing to do with it if you get me alone.'

'I am anguished with need for you. I have missed you. That doesn't mean I'll attack you the moment we're alone.'

'You don't make it sound very exciting.'

'Oh, stop taking that tone. I want to be where I can look at you, touch you if I must, say what I want to say. I can't help that.'

She laughed. 'And you came all the way to Paris to do this to me.'

My head jerked up. 'Do what to you?'

'I don't know.' She pushed her tea away and stood up. 'Come on. Let's go. You can show me where you live.'

We rode in an awkward silence in the closed tonneau of a horse-drawn cab. People at the *pension* glared at me strangely when I walked ahead of Oriana into my apartment. It pleased her to make it worse by holding back and saying over and over in an aggrieved tone, 'Are you sure it's all right, Uncle Tony? Are you sure father said it's all right?'

My face burned, but I strode ahead and refused to answer her, refused to play her game with her. When we left the parlour, she said, smiling over her shoulder, 'I know you'll leave the door unlocked, won't you, Uncle Tony? Won't you?'

Enraged, I entered my small efficiency suite and left the door standing wide. Oriana looked around a moment and then she closed the door loudly and locked it, setting the extra bolts into place as loudly as she could slam them.

She turned slowly, her eyes oddly sleepy. She smiled.

'Now you can kiss me, Uncle Tony.'

'Are you enjoying yourself?' I demanded.

'Not yet. But I hope to.'

'This is all very funny to you, isn't it? A man twice your age. Out of his skull because of you.'

'Why don't you shut up and kiss me?'

'Oh? Do you want Uncle Tony to kiss you?'

She shrugged. 'This is as good a place and time as any.'

I kissed her, the backs of my eyes burning, an ache across the bridge of my nose and every fibre of my body responding to her fresh sweetness and the wild pressure of her mouth.

'Oh my God, my darling,' I whispered.

'Closer. Hold me closer.'

My arms at the small of her back, I half lifted her from her feet and held her close against me. She reached down to my fly and caught my rigidity in her hand. I gasped and drew away.

She laughed. 'You are a virgin.'

'I'm surprised. That's all.'

'Why? Because I wanted to touch you? What do you think we talk about at the convent? Don't you want to hold me?'

'My God. I feel suddenly drunk. On weak tea. I don't know what I want.'

'Why don't you touch me? Down there? Lift up my skirt. It's easy.' When I hesitated, she said, 'Isn't this what you followed me to Paris for?'

My jaw tight, holding my breath, I lifted her skirt and drew my hand up between her heated thighs. She was fevered with heat. 'Touch me,' she said. 'Just easy. With your fingers. I want you to see what you've done to me . . . I'm overflowing. And boiling.'

As God is my witness, she was overflowing down there – and boiling. She was fevered. I thrust my fingers into the wetness of her lips, my head giddy, my heart throbbing in a hurting way at the base of my throat.

She twisted casually away from my hand and let her drab uniform skirt fall again to her ankles. She retreated a step, staring up at me. 'I just wanted you to know,' she said. 'What you might have had.'

'Oh my God.'

Her lovely brow tilted slightly over those huge, unblinking, undeceived eyes. 'Did you think I'd just come in here where nobody can see us and let you push me over on my back?'

My fingers were still wet, glycerine sticky, damp. I said nothing.

She touched me again at my fly. 'Poor dear. You are suffering, aren't you?'

I wanted to hit her. I said only, 'It doesn't matter.'

'But you're wrong, my poor old darling. Of course it matters. It matters to me.' Her voice was honeyed, but she stared at me coldly. 'I don't like to treat others cruelly. I don't want anyone to suffer on account of me.'

I retreated as if we were somehow fencing without epées and she had scored with a direct thrust. I knew what she was alluding to, all right. She had not forgotten or forgiven the way I'd rejected her in my bedroom at Ismailia four years ago – any more than I'd forgotten or forgiven myself. I said, 'What in hell are you talking about?'

She shrugged those lovely little shoulders in that ugly uniform jacket. 'You. Me. The difference between us. The difference in our temperaments. You. Me. Ismailia. I suffered, but *you* didn't care, did you?'

'My God.'

She crossed herself mockingly. 'Oh, He probably cared.'

She pouted faintly, but her eyes laughed – at me, not with me, or in any pleasure at the sight of me. As an irrelevant after-thought she added, 'He probably cared, though at the time I didn't think so . . . I felt abandoned . . . Isn't that funny?'

'I suppose from here it must be.'

She gazed at me intently, refusing to release my gaze. 'Tell me, aren't you just a little bit ashamed of yourself?'

'What do you mean by that?'

She shrugged again. 'Oh, all right. I suppose it didn't matter that much to you. They say Pontius Pilate even forgot the trial of Christ. So it must have been trivial to you, a young girl suffering all the pangs and agony of puppy love. If ever there were such a girl, it was I. I remember so

well. When you came near, I trembled. When you spoke my face lit up like candles. Didn't it flatter you to be treated as if you were a god? Or did you affect all young girls like that?' Then she put her hands on my arms, lightly and conciliatorily, so that I was overwhelmed with the need to gather her close and hold her so forever.

But as if she could read my thoughts in my anguished eyes, Oriana retreated again, smiling in a lemony fashion, not really amused, almost impersonally. My God! If it was revenge she sought, she had it. I was reduced to pulp inside. Like a bloody fool, I didn't know what to think, what to say.

I admitted in that place, standing before her, that I was in love with Oriana. I even realised the truth about why I'd never married any other woman in all these misspent years: none had ever unsettled me as Oriana did; I could live without the others and I did not see how I could live without Oriana. In the past, I had uttered noble-sounding excuses – my nomad existence, nothing to offer a wife, no home, no stability, no garden and fence and soil for roots. But all of that had been lies. I had never wanted to share my life with anyone until now.

I felt as if God meant Oriana for me alone in this fouled-up scheme of our earthly existence. It had to be true, I could conceive of nothing else. And yet, this very idea was preposterous. The same barriers existed now as they had that night she came trembling to my bedroom in Ismailia. If she had loved me then, something fortuitously had helped her put an end to that foolishness and this was as it should be. Oriana deserved someone better and younger than myself, someone who could start bold and fresh and new with her. And yet, for the first time I did not see how I could let her go.

'It's all wrong,' I moaned aloud. 'Come on. I'll take you back to the school.'

She laughed, her voice empty. 'Don't you want to fuck me first?'

It was as if she'd hit me across the face. If she were the *fille moderne* so publicised in Paris these days, I was indeed older than I'd thought.

'You can if you want to,' she continued in that casual voice. 'I've wanted you for such a long time. You were – first – at least you were the first man I *wanted*.'

I winced at the suggestion in her words, and she saw the abrupt twist of agony in my face. She gazed up at me, incredulous. 'Did you really think I was going on waiting for you forever?'

'I tried not to think about it at all.'

She caressed me again below the buckle of my belt, insinuatingly. 'It doesn't look as though you've been all that successful trying not to think about me. You want me. You can have me. This once. Now. Here. Like this . . .'

'Maybe – this isn't the way I want you.'

Her shrug devastated me. 'That's up to you.'

'Oh my God. Is this something else you've talked over at the school?'

'No, I thought this all out. By myself.' She sighed deeply. 'The – others – they haven't been very satisfactory.'

'I'm sorry about that,' I said in cold rage.

She replied in that bland, frustrating tone. 'Well, perhaps you should be sorry. After all, maybe it's your fault I haven't enjoyed myself. Other girls love it, every time . . . Maybe it's your fault I can't enjoy it yet. Don't you understand? You were my first love. Ever since then – and perhaps all the rest of my life – I'll have been haunted – wondering what you were really like, whether I'd have loved it, or hated you . . . Now, I'll be free. Won't I? I can then lead the kind of life I want to – not haunted by anything . . . certainly not by you or *what might have been* – with you . . . That's worth a lot to me.'

I swallowed back the bile gorging up in my throat. 'I've no right . . . to take you – '

'Because you're afraid you might be the first? Relax, dear Tony. You aren't the first. Not any more. You could have been, but you aren't now. You needn't feel guilty. You've lived – all over the world. I've even heard it whispered that you're a wastrel, a cad . . . having one more girl in one more town can't mean very much to you, can it?'

I clutched her slender arms in my hands, fiercely, wanting

to shake her, to bring her back to reason, back to the girl I'd loved in Ismailia – and had lost forever. My voice raked her. 'You'll always mean more to me than anything else in this world.'

'Well, that's too bad, isn't it? But we're not talking about lasting love, or devotion. At least, I hope we're not . . . You brought me here. You must have wanted something . . . If you want me, Tony, you can have me. It's as simple as that.'

'Nothing is ever that simple.'

'It can be, my poor dearest. Or you can make it complicated.'

My voice hardened again. 'Is that the way you like it – easy and uncomplicated?'

'Now you sound jealous again.'

'No. I sound deranged. Because I am. Because we both are.'

Oriana walked away from me in the gathering silence of the afternoon. No sounds seemed to penetrate my room, or else I could hear nothing above the thunder of pulses in my temples.

She set her purse down on a round, gate-leg table. As she turned back to me, in a graceful little pirouette, she removed the turquoise pins from her red-golden hair. Those tresses tumbled free, rich and full-bodied and gleaming down about her shoulders.

I held my breath. She'd looked radiantly beautiful before, but now, with her hair like a cloak about her face, there was added to her beauty a sensuousness that was sweet agony to behold.

Watching me, she loosened the buttons down the front of her drab waist and pulled the garment off, letting it fall from her shoulders to the floor. In her cotton chemise, her breasts taut, full and high-standing, her nipples rigid against the fetters of the restraining fabric, she unhooked her gray skirt. When it toppled about her ankles, she stepped out of it and kicked off her shoes.

A faint smile twisting her full-lipped mouth, she writhed free of the chemise and stood naked and unselfconscious before me.

My eyes burned at the naked beauty and symmetry and elegance of her, from sloping shoulders to narrow waist, the flat planes of her little belly, her flaring hips and long, sculptured legs, all in flesh-tones rich and warm and creamy and idolatrous.

Moving slowly and deliberately, she walked past me and threw back the covers and counterpane with such vigour that they fell to the floor at the foot of my bed.

She lay down across my bed at a long and lovely angle. Turned half upon her back, she gazed up at me, rooted to the floor. She smiled. 'You must do *something*,' she said. 'I can't do it all. I came here to be seduced, not to have to seduce you.'

I simply remained, stunned, not even yet, while staring at her incredible and total nakedness, able to believe Oriana intended going through with a casual coupling, a transient afternoon affair. Nothing in God's world seemed more alien to her very nature.

I blamed myself. I regretted bringing her here. She was reacting rebelliously against everything she had lived by, believed in, been taught. Lying there, she looked young and vulnerable and fragile, and yet she watched me with diamond-hard eyes.

She writhed in a gracefully fluid and distracting motion against the stark white sheets. Her hair spilled across the pillow. She was far more at ease than I.

'Do you want me to undress you?' she inquired.

She reached out, caught my hand and drew me down to the bed beside her. 'Don't be afraid,' she whispered. Then she giggled. 'I'll be gentle.'

'God knows, I hope so.'

I took her face in my hands and kissed her mouth, at first gently. She clung to me, and her lips parted hungrily and she pressed upward in a gentle savagery.

She loosened my tie, unbuttoned my shirt, released my belt and jerked free the buttons of my fly without taking her lips from mine. Her tongue pressed its way between my teeth, seeking my tongue, as if she drank from my mouth thirstily.

Still kissing her, feeling depraved and rotten and excited

out of my skull, I shrugged out of my jacket, ripped my shirt away and thrust my trousers down, tugging at them furiously and hurling them away. She found it all highly amusing and smiled against my lips but did not take her mouth away.

Naked at last, I lay close to her, feeling the strong, vibrant pumping of her heart, the full cushioning of her breasts. My own breathing quickened and it rasped and burned in my tight throat. When I touched her my hands shook visibly.

She writhed her hips closer beneath me, murmuring unintelligible words, whispering mindlessly. Her hands moved over my body, exploring, caressing, clutching.

That faultlessly smooth, heated softness of her flesh kindled fires I hadn't even suspected still existed inside me, needs I had never even contemplated in wildest fantasies, appetites that made me breathless and certain could now never be slaked away from her arms. And with a blazing delight I saw that her own passions were stirred to frenzy. Her body quivered again and again in spasms of delight. I could never let her go, but in that moment I felt stronger than God, sure she would never want to leave me.

We struggled upward to an inexpressible crisis. Now at last we fully belonged, we were one. I drove myself to her. She thrust upward devouring me. She had screamed out when I penetrated her, but she had whimpered only in delight as our passion mounted, as we were possessed by molten hot witchery more volatile than any morality, older than civilisation, fiercer than hostility, more humbling than submission, more destructive than exploding stars.

For a long time neither of us stirred. Locked in embrace, we lay unmoving.

I felt exultant, strong and protective. I closed my arms more tightly about her. My gratification went beyond anything physical. I was totally fulfilled, pleased, delighted, serene. I regretted only all the time we'd lost, the months and days and years we'd wasted.

I drew my mouth reluctantly from hers. I smiled at her. 'You lied to me.'

'Did I?'

'I *was* first. You did lie . . . thank God.'

'God had nothing to do with it. I lied because we do what we must.' She unlocked her ankles and sagged away from me. She lay on her back. Going cold inside, I saw she was staring at the ceiling.

'Why did you lie? You broke my heart.'

'Your poor heart.' She said it in scorn. 'Would you have done it if I had told you the truth?'

'God knows.'

'I know. And I did want you to do it. I didn't want to waste the whole afternoon.'

Rage gorged up through me. 'Now what in hell are you talking about?'

'Me. Not you any more. I wanted to see you – this one time – just to be sure – '

'And are you sure?'

'Oh, yes. I'm all right now. I let you fuck me for only one reason, my stuffed-shirt love . . . I wanted you to know what you might once have had, just for the taking, but now you can never have.'

'Damn it. Don't talk like this.'

'Would you rather I lied to you? Well, I won't lie to you any more. You don't matter to me that much any more.'

I caught her arms, staring down into those flat, hard eyes. 'You don't mean this.'

'I never meant anything more,' she said in that dead, flat tone.

'I don't believe it. You are lying now. You loved me – insanely – with every part of your body.'

'Yes. But you're talking about fucking. Not about love. Anybody can fuck. And you're very good . . . I'm sorry I have no one to compare you with. But this is not love.'

'Damn you.'

'You're so difficult to please, aren't you? First, I must not for any reason on God's earth fall in love with you. Now I lie when I tell you I don't love you. You must make up your mind, Uncle Tony. You can't have it both ways.'

'I pray to God you're lying now.'

'Why?'

'Because I do want you, Oriana. I'll always want you.'

'I hope so. Oh, I hope so. With all my heart, I hope so. I hope that no matter what woman you kiss, make love to, take to bed, fuck – that when you take her, you'll remember me. That you'll think about me. That you will remember you could have had me . . . once . . . Oh, God, that's all I want.'

I shuddered. 'Jesus. You are vengeful, aren't you?'

'Am I?' She moved her lips petulantly. 'Whatever I am, Mr Hamilton, you made me. I was a simple and happy girl, and I fell in love with you with all my foolish heart. All I wanted was to be loved in return as I loved. But that wasn't good enough for you. I should have known you were in Ismailia to betray Ferdinand De Lesseps, why did I think you wouldn't betray me as well? I wasn't good enough for you. I should go off to some hateful prison of a Catholic convent – where they wear *shoes* all the time – '

'God knows I'm sorry.'

'Sorry. Of course you are. You're forever sorry. Sorry about everything. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. You British ass. Well, it's too late. You don't have to be sorry any more, not for me . . . I don't love you any more. I don't want you any more. I don't need ever to see you again. I am well. I was ill – ill of love for you – and you have cured me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I don't care what you are.'

'I never meant to hurt you.'

'You never did anything else. You'll never know how badly I hurt. But that's not your fault. My simpleness, my stupidity. I wanted a house with kitchen curtains, and you wanted to stride around the world finding your substitutes for love. Well, whatever it is you have to offer now, I don't need it. I don't want it. I don't have to be a great lady for you. And I don't have to go back to that stupid convent. I don't have to do anything now except what I want to do . . . Thanks to you, I'm free. I'm going home. That's why I saw you, lover . . . To tell you goodbye and to tell you to go – to hell . . . .'

*Part Four*

# EGYPT, 1868

# XVII

LORD STOPPARD AND I sat on the wide, shaded veranda in wingback wicker chairs. The Embassy's open porch was fringed with wisteria vines which tempered hot winds, curling and twining on the tall round white columns and linking balustrades under a red-tiled roofing and overhang. Sunlight filtered through the leaves and fell across us in a gray crosshatching while, beyond, the heat blazed from the fiery grounds as from a brazier. Beyond the calcined gardens we could see ancient battlements of one of the khedive's summer palaces. I slumped in my chair and watched the great river spill and bend and twist in sluggish flow past the enveloping city, as if this were only another congested shoal temporarily disputing its eternal passage to the sea, renewing in me a melancholy sense of frustration and loss and temporality. Everything in life went so fast, we were here such a brief and unsatisfactory time, how could we place such absurd meaning to our triumphs and losses? Why did we care so deeply? Why did we attach so much importance to everything – to anything – in a world where men and their problems were transient, and only the desert and the river and the mountains persisted?

I knew that Lord Stoppard had been talking – clearing his throat and hawking and repeating and circling back – for some time, between long and contemplative slurps at his tea cup, but I had not paid any attention to him. I didn't give a damn what he had to say. I had been a long time removed from home office bureacracy and management. I'd learned how inconsequential its officious, mannered, rigid, conventional, formal and hidebound muddlings were in the mundane scheme of things.

'Did you get up to Hampton Court?' I heard Stoppard ask.

'Why would I do that?'

'I just wondered if you did any sight-seeing while you were back home in England. It's so far away. When you're out here long enough, you miss all the old places back in Dear Old. Places you never even bother to visit while you're living there. Who did you see while you were home?'

For a moment I studied Stoppard. I didn't bother wondering why he asked about England when very likely he damned well knew I hadn't been back there at all, no nearer than Paris, no nearer than the bistros of Paris. But I was certain what Stoppard had in mind. In his politely probing way, he was trying to force me to say the words aloud, *I didn't get back to England.* Then I supposed he planned some charade that would end when I told him where I had been all these months.

'We've missed you,' Lord Stoppard said with a little smile.

'You're much too kind.'

'Is your family well?'

'As far as I know.'

'You didn't see them?'

'Actually, I didn't.' I met his eyes levelly.

He hesitated another couple of minutes, clearing his throat and slurping his tea. Then he said, 'Did you bring your bulls with you – your pit bulls? One expects to see your animals when one sees you.'

I winced slightly. My poor dogs. I'd left them boarding in the orient when I returned on my leave. I had not seen them again; I had thought of them only often enough to mail off payment for their keep. 'They've probably forgotten me by now,' I said.

Stoppard cleared his throat. 'Not dogs. And especially not those animals. Not pit bulls. They don't forget. No, sir. They cling as tenaciously to loyalty as they do to any other object. Extraordinary animals.'

I nodded and agreed with him. 'I'll send for them,' I said. 'When I am reassigned.'

Stoppard glanced down, obliquely, so that he appeared timid about facing me. 'You've been gone quite a while,' he suggested, almost shyly.

'Yes.' I shrugged my shoulders. 'I anticipate a reprimand of sorts. Demerits. I don't suppose they'll sack me.'

'I should think not.'

'Should you? Why? No one better than you knows how long I overstayed my leave.'

'You're not the first man – the first able and outstanding man – to face a crisis at the onset of middle age, Hamilton.'

I mused over this. 'No, I suppose you're right. It just seems new and original when it happens to oneself, I suppose. Middle age, eh? What do you know about that . . . So that's what's been troubling me.'

He smiled. 'At least that's the official position that's been taken in the home office, old man. The Foreign Service has had a great deal of experience with men who – suddenly tack off on their own, you know.' He cleared his throat. 'I know I had a bad time myself. Some years ago. Stationed at Palembang at the time. Yes . . . A long time ago. Well, unauthorised leave-taking is serious, but not that serious. Not when one has an excellent record, as you do. They don't want to lose you, my boy . . . They hope you're ready to come back and shoulder the old burden . . . and the whole matter will be forgotten. I'm blighted if there'll even be a record of it in your folder, eh?'

'That's more than I deserve.'

Stoppard nodded quite seriously. 'Yes. Well, all of us once in a while get a break that we don't deserve – or that we've earned in the past. Sort of built up points that react in our favour when something goes amiss, eh? Eh? That certainly seems to be the case with you.'

I exhaled heavily. 'So I have been mentioned in the communiqués?'

He smiled. 'A week away is irregular, my boy. Months. That's totally unusual. And at the same time not unheard of. It's nothing the Home Office encourages, certainly. Sets a terribly bad example. I'm sure you can see that?'

'I hadn't given it much thought.'

'You are low. Low indeed, I haven't seen you like this in all the years I've known you out here. Unusual. Yes. Damned unusual.'

'Is it?'

'Well, as I say, it's happened to others in foreign service. And it will happen again. But you must admit it's a bit off. Not standard or even ordinary procedure, eh?'

'I'll admit I've had a bad time recently . . . I hadn't expected any special treatment from the Home Office, not any preferential consideration. I knew what was happening to me. It was just that I was helpless to change it. And I got so I didn't give a damn.'

'My dear boy. You're not alone. Believe me, you're not alone.'

'That's funny, I've felt profoundly lonely.'

He managed a faint smile. 'I know you're making a little rueful joke; but I didn't mean to suggest you were not suffering – and suffering alone . . . I was simply trying to reassure you that the service is standing behind you. You can count on that.'

I sat unmoving for some moments, wondering if this were what I wanted, this official condoning, this bureaucratic understanding and empathy.

I thought about this incredible and unprecedented kindliness and sympathy from a man I'd always considered a bloated, empty ass. *You're not alone,* he'd said. If one had asked me, he was the last man I'd have said would have any understanding at all of deviant behaviour. I hadn't even suspected he truly accepted normality – whatever that is. But I had been in the depths of depression and here was a man who claimed to understand, to have walked the same path himself.

Maybe we are all alike. We all ply back and forth from dark to light, from light to overcast gray. The night and its windless silence are the worst for any except the mindless . . . To lie wide-eyed, tearless, shattered inside, till dim daylight promises a kind of refuge while still threatening another day in which bread and stone taste alike, where we waver between the false and the true and look for a tomorrow that is never better, not even very different, only emptier. This dark void of the human night is the waxing and waning, the time of lost hope, the hour of despair, when every wrong returns multiplied. The unwanted malady has hold of us and remains impervious to remedy or reason.

Bright gold is dulled and all laughter is mocking and even sweetest memories lie scentless and dead, like dross. There is no easy way out – at least I had found none. There is only one way to escape and this way offers no surcease from pain, only a hard-found inner strength to endure, endure till another and better moment when you can finally throw off sorrow like some time-rent garment.

I didn't know whether I was ready to take up the old routines of my life again.

'I hadn't thought about going back to work yet,' I said. 'Not yet.'

'What?' Stoppard stared at me curiously, troubled. 'Do – you mind saying what your plans are – for the immediate future, I mean?'

I shrugged again and smiled emptily. 'No,' I said. 'I don't mind. I stopped by to visit. I'm on my way to the Isthmus.'

'Of Suez?' His fat, beefy, medium-rare cheeks twisted faintly and his eyes widened slightly in the sockets of suet. 'Why would you do that?'

I spread my hands, and watched the river, halted and barred in its way towards the dark and silent sea. 'It seemed a good idea. I thought I might visit De Lesseps.'

'De Lesseps? Vicomte De Lesseps? Why?'

I withdrew slightly from his warmth and friendliness. I was not about to tell him the strange story of unrequited love that I didn't even believe myself as it happened to me. I gestured tentatively again, and lied to him. Just now, anyone who questioned me had every right to anticipate a lie. 'Because he invited me,' I said. 'It seemed as good a place as any other.'

Lord Stoppard drew a deep breath, held it and sat back in his wicker chair ballooned with it. When he exhaled, his jowls shivered slightly. 'I don't know, Hamilton. I don't know. Visiting the canal project, and De Lesseps, just now. On top of everything else, I mean. Is it wise?'

'Probably not.'

'I agree. It is not wise. This – is less than a propitious time for one of her majesty's foreign agents to visit De Lesseps – even in an unofficial capacity.'

'Do you mind saying why?'

Stoppard cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable about the eyes, his graying brows knotted over his bulbous nose. 'Well, I must ask you to accept my – my word – on the matter, at the moment . . . I can say no more, eh . . . But this I can say. It is less than a happy or opportune moment for one of our people to be down there . . . Yes . . . This is a moment of triumph for him – for De Lesseps, you know?'

'No. I didn't know that.'

'Well, it is. Despite our honest opposition to his adventuring out here, despite his skirting the edge of bankruptcy and criminal proceedings, he has the entire waterway opened between the seas. There is, I believe, some months of work to be done – but it is the final stages of construction – before the waterway is opened to shipping – if it ever is to be . . . This is not a very auspicious time for Her Majesty's government out here. You can see that?'

'We have not had a firm and acceptable policy out here since De Lesseps got his firman of concession,' I suggested. 'And that was at least fourteen years ago,'

'We are at a very low place right now. As you well know, having just come from London, our own Prime Minister is basing his campaign for a vote of confidence on his ability to stop the French from opening this canal to shipping. I'm certain none of us – and certainly not you, returning from an extended and unofficial and unexplained absence would want to cause the Prime Minister any further embarrassment in this area.' He shook his head. 'God knows the Jew Disraeli is doing that every day that Parliament is in session.'

'I have no wish to embarrass anyone.'

'Of course you don't. That's why I'm sure you see it is very improper for one in your position – even unofficially – to be consorting with – the enemy at this moment in time.'

'I see.'

'It would be bad enough if you were an ordinary British citizen. But I'm afraid you're not that . . . Not by many leagues, my boy . . . Perhaps I'd better tell you a little official secret that has come my way. In London, they are pushing to have you knighted.'

I almost laughed in his face. 'Knighted? Me?'

'I assure you, it's quite a serious project, and one that has our full and enthusiastic support from out here . . . Of course, I can see you are astonished. Surprised, eh? A commoner by birth. Most unusual, but not unheard of since Her Majesty has come to the throne. And you are indeed well thought of, my boy.'

'That's hardly basis for knighting somebody from the wrong side of the tracks.'

'Oh, I know, as you do, that knighthood is an inherited thing, passed along in the family, and all that. But times are changing, and real merit is being recognised. Specifically, you are being knighted for your long years of service and particularly for your selfless and courageous work among the cholera victims during the plague last year at Me-tan-fu.'

'Good Lord.'

'Face it, Hamilton, my boy. Your – little problem – arose at a most inopportune moment – but it has not had any serious repercussions. You have reached a pinnacle of your career. Even with this prolonged absence, your worth to the service and to Her Majesty's government is so outstanding that you are being rewarded – by Her Majesty herself.'

'Good Lord.'

He smiled and cleared his throat. 'Yes. Yes. Exactly. That is why if you will permit a suggestion from an older and experienced man – who has walked down the same bumpy road on which you find yourself right now – the moment has come to put aside all other considerations, to restate your responsibilities, to place your priorities in order – and don't – for God's sake – do anything else to rock the boat. Eh? Eh? Eh?'

# XVIII

AS OUR SMALL caravan crested the knoll of a vast and elongated sand dune, we stopped our dromedaries, halting as one man.

The canal headquarters work-site lay sprawled in all its prodigious splendour like some immense circus, its lanes and buildings and tents broadcast in every direction on both sides of the man-made channel.

The Egyptian camel-tenders chattered and whispered in superstitious disbelief and awe. Whatever they had believed my goal to be out here when we departed from Cairo, they'd anticipated nothing as marvellous as this majestic exhibition – any more than I had.

I signalled to the Arabs that we had reached our destination. We had bounced and wallowed aboard the camels, day after day, across the corrugated yellow sands which stretched, marble-hard and sterile, sunstruck and interminable.

We'd sat out each dawn and travelled till the blaze of desert sun forced us to take refuge under any shelter we could find or devise. If there was nothing else we set up canvas flats across rope-secured poles, and we crouched in the miserly shade and broiled and sweated and hated each other.

When the sun finally lowered sufficiently to enable us to travel again, we boarded the dromedaries and went on until we found some sort of oasis where we could spend the night. The head camel herder led our procession, always fearfully on the lookout for desert nomads whom, they said, would cut off a man's testicles and eat them, right before his eyes. I followed behind this timid fellow and the others straggled behind us, whining, their camels occasionally bawling in simple mean-spiritedness.

I passed through this arid wasteland unseeing, my vision turned inward. All through the eternal trek, the silence broken only by the camels or an infrequent shout from one of the bearers, I turned over and over in my mind the memory of that last day in Paris with Oriana, that heavenly nightmare. I recalled what we had done, and what we had said to each other, what I had said to her and everything she had said to me. And there was never any satisfaction to be found in the recalling, and no change in its painful termination and as always, I came away scarred and hurt. I had not said what I'd wanted to say to her. I had not been able to make her see how deeply and eternally I loved her, and even now, in my helplessness, I wondered if it would have mattered, or changed her heart at all, if I'd said the right words. I had come so far, across sea and desert, to find out, to try again and because I miserably admitted, I was helpless to do anything else.

Pausing on the crest of the great dune, my heart pounding as if I'd run all these hellish miles from Cairo, I gazed in disbelief at the triumph and splendour laid out before me, the immense expanses of mortar, metal and stone, of stocks and wares and fires and furnaces, of banks and heaps of fuel, of materials, animals, tents, workshops, heavy equipment. And more than a display of organised industry, there was the prodigious splendour of indefatigable men, moving in that hive of activity with eagerness and direction.

But even as I stared at this incredible creation of engineering accomplishment, my mind and heart and gaze were wandering. I searched its far perimeters for the sign of a young woman alone on an Arabian horse, or walking near the tents, or lighting up the dazzling day. All I could really think was that Oriana was down there and I would soon be with her.

I signalled the trailsman to head downslope to the camp. But he hesitated, his face twisted with concern.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

He swung his arm south and I followed his gesture. I saw the soldiers for the first time, their red coats reflecting the sun, their guns blazing with it. Then he nodded his head downward, and this area too was heavily patrolled by troops

of Ismail Pasha's Egyptian army. To the east, and west and north were other troops, standing guard in the sun.

I exhaled heavily, unable to relate this heavily guarded, massive and industrious region with the worksite I'd first seen five years earlier at Ismailia. De Lesseps' dream had come a long way since then. He had opened his waterway, he had connected the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and he worked under the constant protection of the regent's own army.

We sat on our camels and stared down at the troops along the worksite perimeter directly below us. They had spied us by now and a few of the horsemen rode upslope and sat with their guns resting on their hips, watching us.

Knowing better than to attempt to invoke the name of the master of this miracle, De Lesseps himself, I made myself known to the Egyptian captain and asked for the engineer Linant Bey.

In less than an hour, which was incredibly speedy in this land of tomorrow, Linant Bey rode out to meet us.

He leaped from his horse and smiling, ran towards me. I got down from the great camel saddle and we embraced in the fierce glare of the sun.

The soldiers and the camel tenders looked at each and grinned.

I stared at Linant, pleasurably shocked and surprised at his appearance. He looked different, but more than that, his entire submissive, almost apologetic attitude had altered. He was stroked with success, with inner authority and self-assurance. He asserted himself simply by showing up. One looked at him now and saw the long way he'd come since 1854. He'd ridden the whirlwind for fourteen eternal years and learned to command the storm. This was evident in his bearing. There was an air of dominance and quiet power about him. He'd gained weight; he'd lost the old harassed look about his dark eyes. He feared no one. He had proved himself. He had justified the early faith of Said Pasha and of De Lesseps. They had believed in him, and he had done more than succeed, he had triumphed.

He gave orders in a quiet, firm tone and my bearers and

train were led away by obsequious soldiery. My men went with smiles. They'd decided at last that perhaps the English person might be a man of some consequence after all. They bowed towards me and smiled, leading the camels towards water and grain.

Linant and I crossed the bustling camp, going towards the round tent which Linant shared with Mougel. Their quarters were set apart from the workers and from the under supervisors. They had indeed moved up in the world.

Linant spoke with pride of this unprecedented achievement, this channel hacked and chewed and cut across the desert. I afforded him as much polite attention as I could, but my gaze wandered. I searched for some glimpse of Oriana because I was helpless to do otherwise.

The tent flaps were open to catch any errant breezes. The rugs were spread over the beddings. Work tables were set up and as we stepped into the shade from the blazing sunlight. I saw Mougel working at one of the drafting boards.

He leaped up when he recognised me and hurried towards us, his hands extended.

Mougel, in his way, was as changed in attitude and appearance as Linant Bey. I remembered Mougel as a fat little brown man, with petulant mouth and chubby cheeks, of round shoulders and soft, bulbous hips. Since I'd seen him last he'd lost at least fifty pounds. There was a look of hardness about him, a kind of world weariness and an inner strength that he had developed and honed over the years. His eyes glittered, blacker than ever, but were chilled, even when he smiled. This ordeal in the Isthmus had been hell for him, but he had learned from it, he had profited. He had realised his own sense of worth, and he quietly asserted himself as he never had before. The cost had been high for Mougel, but there was about him no feeling that he regretted any of it. His hair glistened gray at his temples and lines had deepened in his cheeks and about his mouth. The desert crucible had forged a strong and self-reliant man in fourteen years.

'We have done it, M'sieu,' Mougel said in an exultant voice. 'The final obstacles, these only remain in our way, and soon they will be no more, eh? We have only the

finishing touches, eh? The finishing touches to the miracle of the nineteenth century, the greatest engineering achievement of mankind, it is a reality at last, is it not?'

I laughed. 'You sound like Vicomte De Lesseps himself.'

Mougel smiled. 'No. I can see the miracle now, M'sieu. Now at last when it is stretched before me from one sea to the other. I can see it. The difference is that Vicomte De Lesseps saw what none of us could see. He saw the miracle when there was yet no single watercourse anywhere in this desert.'

'Things have often been uncertain, unsure. We have skirted on the very brink of ruin,' Linant said. 'There were many times when I saw despair in the Vicomte's face, and yet he never despaired – and with his leadership we have managed to hold it all together.'

'You are to be congratulated,' I said. 'All of you. You, Linant and you Mougel. The terrible burden fell to you. I can say honestly that I never believed I would see this job so near completion.'

'Nor did I,' Linant admitted.

'I believed for one reason only,' Mougel confessed. 'I believed because Vicomte De Lesseps believed. Where he believed, one could not doubt.'

'Nothing can stop us now,' Linant Bey said. He smiled expansively. 'No. Nothing.'

'My dear young friend.' De Lesseps' voice boomed out as he strode into the tent. 'Word just came to me that you had arrived in camp. I accept that as an omen of final good, of total achievement.'

I looked at Vicomte De Lesseps, lost in astonishment. Here he was, standing before me, a man well into his sixties, who appeared to be no more than in his middle forties. His hair was grayer, perhaps, but it was still thick and brush-like. And here he came in upon us, full of vigour, enthusiastic, splendid and indefatigable. Watching him, I was bewildered. He had defied not only the elements, the gods, his human enemies, he had so far managed to remain a young and intense man in the midst of some marvellous adventure. For years he had lived by his wits, his life and his

life's work hadn't been worth a copper, he had been despised, villified and abandoned, and yet he remained gallant and strong and indestructible.

And he was as arrogant as ever.

He invited me to dinner, an Egyptian meal of batarikh and baba-ghanoug. The small table was set in De Lesseps' tent, splendid with fine silver and china and served beneath tall incensed tapers. Ibrahim refused to allow anyone else to serve us the Egyptian caviar and baked eggplant mashed and mixed with sesame paste and flavoured with garlic, lemon and olive oil, as well as pigeons that had been broiled over an open spit giving the meat a smoky tang. There was also roz bel Khata, fried rice with currants, lamb and liver.

Ibrahim was constantly at our elbows.

Ibrahim had also altered incredibly in the years since I'd seen him last. There was a gloss and polish about him, an urbane attitude of success. Where he'd once been oily and meek until you longed to kick him, he was now unctuous, vain and self-satisfied. He remained the same fawning barbarian, unable to do enough to please his master, but he was no longer submissive or self-effacing. Far from it. His old effrontery had hardened into a kind of fawning brassiness. He was brazen even while he bowed and crouched in his servile way. He too had assumed some of the colouration of his master; there was a brittle arrogance about him. He looked down his nose which was quite a long view. He realised he had made the one exactly correct choice in serving De Lesseps and one felt he knew he could achieve nothing higher in this transient life than as the manservant of the Vicomte De Lesseps, that Lion of the Suez, the most important man in Egypt, perhaps tomorrow the toast of the world.

And Ibrahim was at his elbow.

'I must congratulate you, Vicomte,' I said. 'Not on your supreme accomplishment. I realised that once you set your mind to the task, you would be the irresistible force. I congratulate you on the sheer magnitude of this operation. It is a far cry from four years ago in Ismailia.'

De Lesseps laughed, pleased with the flattery. 'Of course it is,' he said. 'But it is really not difficult to understand. At

last we have finally learned our trade. Now we all know all there is to know about how to build a canal, efficiently and with minimum waste and with total utilisation of man and animal power as well as mechanical energy. After all, Tony, it only took us fourteen years to learn.'

'You have learned well.' I smiled at him. I had never seen the Vicomte more exultant, vibrant with triumph and pride of accomplishment. His life's work lay spread before him, as far as he could see across this wasteland – and beyond. 'You look as if you have solved your financial problems.'

He laughed and shook his head. 'That may well be more illusion than fact, my dear young friend. We have walked on the very brink of ruin every step of the way from one sea to the other. We stayed just ahead of the creditors.'

'Certainly things are going your way now.'

He smiled. 'You're getting the view from the flying trapeze, Tony, from the high wire – the tightrope where we walk. Empress Eugenie has given us total support – but at incredible cost. Only the immediate success of the canal once it is opened to traffic can save the Second Empire from bankruptcy.'

I remembered the night we had gone to visit the Empress in her private suite. 'You must have pleased Eugenie to get her full support – against the opposition of Louis Napoleon.'

He shrugged his heavy shoulders and smiled, and I could see he too was recalling the night he had spent in her bed, by royal command. 'I let her please me,' he said. 'That is the way you enslave women – slavey or empress.'

'I wondered,' I said in more honesty than I intended.

But he was too self-involved to notice my betrayal of raw honesty. 'I have her support – at her price. It is Ismail Pasha who distresses me. I am fearful that not even the commercial success of the canal – and I know this to be assured – will be enough to save him. He has been a saviour. I had no right to expect from him all the benefits and favours granted me by Said Pasha who after all was a close and dear friend. But Ismail Pasha has dedicated himself and his treasury to the completion of the Suez canal. He has brought himself and his country to the brink of bankruptcy. We need a huge

infusion of fresh capital that could be used in part to extricate him from the terrible burden he has borne these past years.

'As you know, last year, in 1867, Ismail Pasha issued ultimatums to the Sultan of Turkey with regards to the execution of governmental affairs in Egypt. A council of the Turkish cabinet debated lengthily the future of Ismail Pasha. From that meeting came the title of Khedive, accorded to Ismail Pasha by the Turkish government. From that date Ismail Pasha was to be addressed as Khedive which is the Arabic equivalent of King. This gave him greatly increased powers over internal affairs – and practically ended Turkish interference with our project.

'Still, this mammoth undertaking has been too huge for the treasury of any one nation – or any two nations. I made this clear from the first. I called this venture universal, because I felt it would require international co-operation. Well, it has required it, but we have not got it. We have walked our tightrope and Khedive Ismail has gone gallantly down the road to fiscal ruin. We have now reached that unenviable place in our journey where we ask which now comes first – the completion of the canal, or anarchy? There is only one thing we can say in all truth. It has not been dull. . . .'

# XIX

SMILING ODDLY, IBRAHIM bent over my chair and whispered something.

'I'm sorry, Ibrahim,' I said. 'I didn't hear. What did you say?'

'Someone to see you.' De Lesseps spoke for his servant.

I frowned faintly. 'Did you tell them I was at dinner with the Vicomte?' I said.

Ibrahim only grinned, somehow looking more like a camel than ever.

'You are forgiven,' De Lesseps said to me. 'Some matters take precedence over all others, Tony.'

I bowed slightly towards the Vicomte and stood up, dropping my linen napkin on the table beside my plate. 'I'll make it as brief as possible,' I said, but De Lesseps only laughed and waved his arm.

I crossed the Persian carpeting, pushed the flap aside and went out into the windy desert darkness. I stood in a shaft of saffron light from the tent entry and looked around, searching the heavy shadows.

'Tony . . .'

My heart leapt and then faltered. That sorry organ grew heavy and balky in my chest. I wanted to cry out, to shout in my delight at the sound of that voice. My pleasure was too great for words. I said nothing, but stood as if rooted to that spot, looking around in the strange, whispering night silence.

'Oriana?' I said.

I saw her then, or the outline of her, in the faintly illumined dark. She stood only a few feet from me, in the rim of shadows. But she remained unmoving, hesitant, suddenly timid, waiting.

'Oriana.'

But like some vision without reality she went on standing there, motionless, a reflection of the past, a mirage. It was as if she had come so far and could approach no nearer.

'Oriana. My God, Oriana.'

The agonised pleasure in my voice was the magic that unlocked all her own uncertainty. My need and my love were in my tone for I could no more have kept them out than stopped breathing. There could be no doubting my fevered jubilance at finding her again.

As if this was what she had to hear, Oriana ran to me and I caught her silently and roughly in my arms, never meaning to let her go. I clutched her against me fiercely, somehow afraid to believe reality. I never wanted to release her again. I felt her heart pound up under mine in a wild kind of matching rhythm. Her arms went up my back to my shoulders, pulling me down to her. Our mouths sought, met, parted, clung in moist hot abandon.

'You came to me,' she whispered once, at last, speaking against my lips.

I held her tighter, tasting the sweetness of her mouth, feeling the nearness and warmth and pliant suppleness of her. God knew I had missed her even more than I'd known, with a hunger deeper than I had any means of understanding – as I had never wanted anyone before. I had been bereft, less than whole without her. And now, holding her, I was alive again for the first time since she'd walked away from me in the distant Paris darkness.

'I've needed you. So terribly.' I said against her parted lips.

'And I you. I looked for you. All day. Every day. Even when I knew better. Even when I knew I'd driven you away, I looked. I waited. At night, when I slept, I dreamed of your face. Your arms. Your love.'

I tried to laugh. 'At least you slept.'

'Oh, I was such a fool. Such a little fool. In Paris. Such a fool. I knew you had come back to me. I knew you had come to Paris for me. But I was such a fool. All I could think was to even things between us.'

'It's all right.'

'No.' Oriana shuddered. 'It's a waste. And any waste is

sinful . . . we have such little time . . . and I threw it away.'

'We both were wrong,' I said. I drew her closer against me. 'But that is over, Oriana . . . It doesn't matter any more. It's all past.'

She trembled; I could feel the tremor wrack her slender body. She reached up and stroked my face with chilled fingers. 'Is it all right? Is it, Tony? Can we ever make up what we've thrown away?'

I smiled and kissed her. 'If we work at it. Night and day.'

'You'll grow tired of me.'

'My God! Such a way to talk. We just found each other again.'

She exhaled heavily. 'But you don't know how low I've been . . . How empty. How lost without you.'

I kissed her, letting my lips graze across the rich fullness of her mouth. She clung to me, digging her fingers into my arms, my back, my throat. She sighed. 'It's really you,' she said with a little disbelieving laugh. 'You did come back. I'm not dreaming.'

'Not unless we're sharing the same dream.'

'I became afraid to believe anything good – '

'I followed you. From Paris. Whether you wanted me or not.'

' – I knew I'd been such a fool. You came to me. In Paris. And I threw it away . . . I was so stupid . . . I could not believe I would get a second chance.'

'A second.' I kissed her. 'A third.' I kissed her again. 'As long as I go on breathing.'

'Oh, Tony.' She trembled again, glancing around in the darkness. Her hands tightened on me. 'Let's go – somewhere.'

I laughed, drunk with happiness, still unable to believe it entirely, and yet no longer able to doubt as long as I held her close. 'Shouldn't we tell your father?'

'Why?'

'Isn't it time we started doing things right?'

'Yes. I guess so. We'll tell him. Soon. Not now. He can wait.' She shivered again, delightfully. 'I can't . . .'

'But we owe him – '

'He *knows*, Tony . . . The world knows . . . I could hide

my love from no one but you.'

I held her closer. 'I never was smart about such things.'

'No.' She laughed in delight and kissed me. 'You never were. But I'll teach you . . . But right now – there's such an ache inside me. Such a burning. Such a need. Only you – '

She let her voice trail away on the wind and withdrew from me. I felt a chill in the gale-whipped darkness – a portent of what existence would be for me without her now. In a kind of chilled panic I tried to pull her back to me, but she only laughed. 'Not here, darling . . . Come. I know just the place . . . I've thought about it . . . I've planned how I'd take you there, the moment I found you again – '

'Is it far?' I tried to keep my voice light, but I felt empty-bellied with the rush of need for her, the memory of her, the anticipation, the agonising thought that the long time of waiting was over at last.

'You must know me better than that.' Oriana smiled across her shoulder in the shadows, her fingers tightening on my hand.

'I hardly know you at all – '

'I'm going to change all that, my angel. Right now – '

My hand closed on Oriana's and I stepped out from the rectangle of wan light to follow her across the dark encampment to this secret rendezvous she'd fantasised for us.

The world exploded and caved in around me. At first I thought the Isthmus had been abruptly rocked by earthquake. There had been no previous stirrings in the ground, or if there had been, I had been too obsessed with Oriana's presence to be aware.

But I felt the terrible force of the quake which now shook the earth, seeming to wrench it away from beneath my feet.

I went sprawling and lunging outwards, grasping at thin air for support. The first shock ripped Oriana's hand from my grasp and she toppled helplessly away from me in the thunderous dark.

The rumbling from the ground was fierce, but somehow too abrupt for any earth tremors. This quick fact fled through my brain on the waves of terror, not a thought at all, just a fearful reaction to the explosions.

A weird glow lit the sky around us like sputtering rocket fire. The blasts seemed to detonate inside my head and rattle there violently. Dazed, I yelled Oriana's name. Around me, tents and buildings seemed to dance, groan and suddenly implode in the turmoil.

The crackling clamour and reverberation of thunder increased. One shock followed another. Those pale rockets seemed to flare upwards, wan and terrible, with their strange and eerie glow dense with dust and debris that clouded across everything.

'Oriana!' I yelled. I was thrown to my knees. For a long second I hung there on my hands and knees, hardly aware of where I was. All I could think was that I had to find Oriana.

I lunged upwards to my feet, still half-dazed, yelling Oriana's name as boulders, rocks and tools showered down around my head in a kind of lethal storm.

This hurtling, falling, spinning debris was deadly – the flying rocks and shattered gear and clods of broken earth could kill. But I could not think of that. I could not care. There was no place in my mind for thought of personal danger. I felt nothing but terror for Oriana.

I shouted her name again, at the top of my lungs. Around me, I was aware of men screaming in agony, shouting in shock and rage, calling to others, issuing orders no one heard or heeded.

The thudding of boulders into the sand around me added fearful dimensions of terror. Dimly, I saw Oriana prostrate on the ground and unmoving. Sickness gorged through me.

I half-threw myself upon her, thinking only to shield her body with mine. She was mumbling something incoherently. I could not tell what she was saying. I was aware of the pound of falling debris, the pound of boots as men ran past us, the explosions seeming to grow out of each other.

Then I realised that Oriana was fighting me. She fought as fiercely and furiously as a tigress, mindlessly clawing and pummelling me, snagging at my eyes with her fingers, screaming out her rage.

Waves of sickness washing through me, I stared down at her face. In the slowly erupting fires I saw the hatred twisting her mouth and clouding her eyes. 'And I thought

you came back to me . . . you . . . you Englishman.'

She brought her knee up into my crotch. Gasping, I fell away and she broke free. By the time I could move again, she was gone, lost in the chaos . . . .

# XX

DISASTER. THE ENTIRE desert world seemed to crash in around me, shattered and demolished. In a matter of minutes the magnificent work-site was a scene of indescribable destruction and ruin.

Nothing was truly real in my mind during those next eternal hours of nightmare. No one ever was able accurately to count how many explosions ripped that region to smithereens. There was first the piercing whistle, the blast itself, and the earth and buildings were rent asunder, rising slowly in clouds of devastation and then crumbling down in upon themselves in a kind of hypnotic and malevolent tranquillity. One could almost believe that the cosmos itself would disintegrate in just this way. In the wake of the destructive force, nothing stood. Great iron and steel machines were lifted head-high and toppled aside, broken and crippled.

Men, mindless with terror, stood as if in catatonic trance. There seemed no sanctuary in this devastation. There was no pattern to the destructive explosions. Blasts erupted randomly, first in one place, and then in another, sending people, materials and constructions tumbling and reeling in wreckage. A pall of dust, filled with debris, hung for breathless moments and then crumpled, breaking into wisps over gutted ruins.

I struggled to my feet, pain intense in my groin. Shouting Oriana's name I ran through the clouding dust. In another explosion I was thrown prostrate. I lay face-down in the thunderous crashing and smothering dust. A hailstorm of stones fell all around me. That raging, deafening explosion roared, echoed and reverberated in the earth itself. The sound thinned out, ceased and then blazed anew in another detonation.

The frangible silence between eruptions held its own brand of terror. As each roar abated, horror relaxed briefly while one realised that by some miracle he had survived for the moment. But then, in the thick dust-dense pall, one waited for that next blast, with the paralysing feeling that one might well be lying on the planted explosive.

All around me buildings had been shattered, some of them levelled. The explosives had sown a wild blanketing of rocks over everything in the encampment. Because the dust was so thick, too heavy even for the violent desert winds easily to disperse, one could not see very far in any direction. There was no way to gauge the extent of damage.

I kept thrusting my way forward across the encampment. In places the earth was split into long narrow fissures. Shattered tents hung like broken limbs in the darkness. And the convulsions and explosions continued for what seemed an eternity, first near and then distantly in the night, blasting without design or pattern.

One truth was obvious. Each explosion wreaked its deadly havoc. The explosives had been set to crumble buildings, rip out landslides along the canal embankments, to spread havoc and terror and death and total destruction.

Running, I stumbled over the dead and maimed. Sprawling in the darkness, I fought for my balance, calling out Oriana's name, moving through the rumbling discharges aimlessly, staggering, choked, through vast dark clouds of dust and smoke and vapours. The smell of blood and death rode thickly on the wind. Fires broke out all across the worksite, first small and fitful, then abruptly raging out of control.

In the flash and flaring of abrupt firelight, I thought I saw Oriana ahead of me. I clambered faster through the rocks, debris and broken slopes. Around me small stones flew and bounced, glancing like cannonades off anything left standing.

Half-crouching, my shoulders hunched like ineffectual armour, I hurried on in the strange half-lit darkness. I no longer saw any sign of Oriana. I had small hope of finding her. I knew only that I could not stop until I did come upon her.

The night was thick with people, screaming in panic and running in what seemed mindless circles. The earth crackled and splintered underfoot. I kept moving, pausing only to search in the weirdly illumined dust clouds for any glimpse of Oriana. When I yelled her name now it was a hopeless, pleading sound, even in my own ears.

I skirted those places where explosives had ripped huge raw caverns in the embankments. Landslides thundered downward, clotting the channel. It was all ruin, as if the earth itself had disintegrated, as if the planet were ready to crack and crumble and sink into itself in the molten gloom.

These broken slopes loomed red, sinister, ravaged, ghastly in the smokily lit clouds of debris. But I could not think about the destruction now. I had no thoughts at all except that I must somehow find Oriana, everything else was only flashes of half-formed, crazy ideas, mindless and unreasoning.

'Oriana . . . .'

I fought my way across broken, desolate gray mounds. God knew what once had stood here. The piling of rubbish loomed raggedly in the night. I gasped for breath in the clotting dust, struggling against walls of shifting sand. The ground itself was as unstable as mud and walking was like sloshing knee-deep through water.

I battled my way across this broken slope. Sliding stones and loosened boulders slowed but didn't stop me. Behind me, new landslides shivered, broke and spilled in my wake. A stone, hurtling through clouds, struck my shoulder with agonising force and knocked me to my knees.

Before I could struggle to my feet, the soft earth engulfed me. Frantically, I crawled and clawed my way upwards out of the smothering embrace, the stones slipping from beneath me at every step and threatening to carry me in some plunging deluge downslope. The ground under me heaved and swelled like breakers in a churning sea, a strange and fearful motion.

By now, men came running from all directions carrying torches and huge reflector lanterns. The light was feeble against the thickly occluding clouds of dust. This dust, driven like fog at sea, moved in a terrible slow motion in the

fragmented darkness. The prolonged sounds of explosives, long-drawn roars, decreased, deadened and fading. Suddenly, as the detonations had started, they ceased. But there was a waiting sense of fearful expectancy. One could not believe the terror had spent itself. Upper crusts of loose sand and rock continued to slide downward and underlayers were exposed, laid raw, more loosened rocks and mounds of sand, ready to topple.

I stumbled, caught myself, and stared down in numb horror.

To this moment I am unable to say how much, or how little there was on that littered promontory, but I saw Oriana like a discarded doll crumpled and thrown face down in the sand. As clearly, I saw the grisly cut across her forehead where she'd been struck by flying debris and the gushing of blood from the open wound.

Madness of terror seized me. All I could think was that she was dead. 'Oriana,' I muttered in anguish. I knelt beside her and lifted her in my arms. She did not move her eyes or mouth. I could not even tell if she were breathing. I held her. I was helpless.

I lifted her in my arms and stood up in the unstable sands. People ran past me. Carrying her, I walked slowly, stumbling, catching my balance, but cradling her gently. I came at last to the hospital, but had to fight my way through rings of terrorised and battered people.

I yelled for a doctor.

I don't know how long I stood holding her limp body in that sea of bloodied, battered humanity. I felt weak, not with exhaustion – I would not lay Oriana down even when the nurses insisted – but enfeebled with the numbing fear that it was already too late, that she was dead. Her head bled profusely. The blood oozed along her cheeks and ran into the soft tendrils of her hair.

I yelled again for a doctor. Orderlies shouted at me, but I raged back that I would not release Oriana to any other than a superior surgeon.

A mild, dark little man spoke at my elbow. 'I am a doctor, m'sieu. I am Doctor Hassan Bey.'

I nodded, lifting Oriana slightly in my leaden arms. 'She's badly hurt,' I mumbled.

He shrugged slightly. 'They're all badly hurt, m'sieu. All of them.' The doctor's voice was almost casual, but at the murderous rage he must have seen in my eyes, he motioned me to follow him. We pushed through the knots of wounded and maimed and found a bed for Oriana in a temporary emergency surgery tent.

I laid her down on the bed and the orderlies and Dr Hassan Bey shoved me aside. I retreated only a step. I remained unmoving, watching Oriana, motionless on that gray mattress. I stared down at her bloodied face, looking for some faint sign of life, anguished as the doctor worked swiftly over her, not even sure she was still alive.

At last the little doctor glanced up across his shoulder at me and nodded. He even managed a faint, tired smile, without much reassurance or friendliness in it. 'She lives.' This was all he said. It was as if he could spare me no more of either his precious time or energy in this holocaust.

I still did not move. They continued working over Oriana, preparing her for head surgery. Once more, Dr Hassan Bey glanced up at me. He did not bother to smile now and his voice was chilled. 'You may as well go now, M'sieu. There is nothing more we can tell you.' Then his face softened faintly, tempering slightly the inner rages of weariness. 'We will do for her all we can – all we know . . . .'

'Yes.' I nodded. I looked about helplessly. 'I'll come back.'

He shrugged and turned his back. He had already forgotten me.

I don't know how long I'd stood helplessly in that makeshift surgery area. But when I came out, I found the encampment alive with torch and lantern – and fires burning out of control all across the compound.

Supervisors shouted commands, ordering the labourers, trying to restore some semblance of routine in the madness. Grumbling men responded, moving in sleep-walking rigidity. The wind abated slightly and the fires gradually came under control before daybreak. Crews were set at once

to checking heavy machinery, to salvaging what could be saved, to restore any part of it to working order. But the men reacted to commands without spirit, without hope. They followed order only as long as their masters could be seen standing near them in the strange and violent ruins.

Almost as soon as I came out of the hospital, I found De Lesseps abroad with his superior engineers. They seemed everywhere at once, surveying, calculating, assaying, predicting and cursing. They drank gallons of black coffee, carrying the steaming liquid in mugs.

De Lesseps strode in silent fury across the ruined compound. He took giant strides and his men hurried to keep step with him. Everyone watched him. His face, his manner, revealed nothing. When someone asked him a question, he gave them a quiet, considered and unhurried answer. One could not look at him and believe he had finally nursed to completion a magnificent project, only to see it battered and gutted in mindless malice. There was an almost stoic tranquillity about him in the frenzied night.

He found little to reassure him in the long silent hours before dawn. Whatever remained standing was fantastically misshapened, broken, ravaged beyond recall or restoration. Out in the abysmal darkness of the canal channel one saw the mud flats, the sandbars, the uprooted rip-rap from the crumbled embankments. Nothing remained intact of that fabulous achievement. There lay before him only black ruin, chaos, clamour and tumult.

All across the encampment crushed and mangled men died in slow and anguished protest. From the darkness the wind brought the moans and sobs and shrieks of agony. A pall of despair hung in the night. Able men ran to aid the screaming victims, only to find them already dead, too shattered to move, beyond mortal repair. These helpers paused, for the fraction of an intolerable moment, staring down helplessly as life fled the prone, mangled body and the wailing finally ceased. A crippled man would lift his head, black eyes distended with pain in the faint light. He would cry for help and die before it reached him.

With the first cracked seams of daylight, crews were assembled and dispatched to repair and rebuild. They

crawled cautiously down embankments and removed broken earth and stones and boulders long after they were trembling with exhaustion and ready to fall in their own tracks. Many hung their heads, muttering. 'It can't be brought back. One sees it cannot be repaired. It is God's will . . . God's will . . . .'

As the first sun blazed along the horizon, entire work sections were pressed into service burying the dead, men and animals. By some hellish design, the slaughter of asses, camels and horses had been fiendishly and expertly accomplished. Steam shovels were lined up, long trenches dug in the earth. Bodies were bulldozed into these ditches and covered over, unmarked and forgotten.

They died wholesale; the slaughter was so extensive that one could not look at it except impersonally. I knew that Oriana teetered on the brink of death, but she was not one of these people, these faceless labourers who would be replaced in a day's time. The horror and pain of the killing struck only when one heard of the death of an intimate. During the night I learned that Ibrahim had been killed. This brought it closer, a raw and hurting agony.

Ibrahim dead!

I stood over the thin, battered body and tears blurred my eyes. I was aware first of how small he was. He'd always seemed cocksure, pompous, haughty, puffed up and self-important and this seemed to add to his physical stature. One despised his brashness, his lying and his total arrogance. One did not realise how physically frail he was. Only his great nose had a look of strength and size now that he lay dead; his emaciated body cringed behind the Arabic splendour of that extraordinary proboscis. I remembered how I had decried his bluster and fawning, knowing him to be an empty, oily clown. Seeing him tossed among the dead and learning how he came to be there made me forget my old feelings of disapprobation and disparagement. I saw that Ibrahim had been true, at least, to his own ideal, he'd sought his own grail, devoted his life to his own audacious design for success.

The men sitting around the headquarters building talked

softly about Ibrahim and the way he'd died. He had lingered through most of the night, clinging for hours to a faint spark of life. His questions had all been for his master and his master's safety. Was the Vicomte well, unharmed? Had the master escaped the explosives?

Ibrahim babbled, the men said. He admitted to having fallen, or having been thrown to his knees at the first explosion. He had crouched there on the ground, seeking cover, whimpering in terror. Only gradually had he realised that Vicomte De Lesseps had run at once from the tent, hurrying out immediately after the initial blast.

Ibrahim had gone on crouching there, his arms wrapped over his head, but unable to discover the security he wanted though a thick oaken table protected him from the storm of debris. He'd probably had as strong a sanctuary as any in the night had he only remained cringing there.

At last, troubled about the Vicomte, frightened at his own loneliness as the explosions continued, rumbling hideously in the earth beneath him, he'd been unable to stay there under that thick table any longer. Drawing a deep breath and holding it, he'd slowly crawled out. Once on his feet, he forgot the fear that had numbed his brain, now anxious for the safety of his beloved master. Without the greatness of the Vicomte, Ibrahim had no status of his own. Unless the Vicomte lived, Ibrahim no longer lived, even if he went on breathing and walking among the quick.

He ran out of the crumpling tent into the nightmare of maimed bodies and cratered land.

He snagged with clawing fists at the arms of men running past him. They paused only long enough to stare at him, to curse him and to break free of his talon-like fingers. He yelled only one word at all of them, the only word in his mind. 'De Lesseps?' Most of the men shook their heads if they answered him at all. He was not even sure they heard him in the turmoil, or if hearing him, they understood.

He moved, half-staggering, along the rutted, broken land, going toward the canal because this was where he was certain his beloved master would go at once.

'De Lesseps?' he shouted into the strange, smeared, mindless faces he met in the fiery darkness.

Few answered him at all. Most shook their heads. Once, someone grabbed him and set him to dragging heavy timbers and stacked debris from a crater in which half a dozen screaming men were trapped.

For some time Ibrahim worked, displaying a physical strength neither he nor anyone else suspected he possessed. But then as if his mind belatedly registered what he was doing, and what he ought instead to be doing, he dropped a thick log, heeled around and ran again downslope toward the dark bank of the canal.

Men worked as frantically down there as they did in all the other sectors of the encampment. The devastation was stunning.

'De Lesseps?' Ibrahim yelled into the faces of all the men he met.

They tried to turn him back, tried to set him to work, but he broke free, cursing them, raging at them, hurrying toward the waterway.

The men who had witnessed it, said it was as if Ibrahim raced toward his own doom, his fate, kismet, his rendezvous with violent death . . . .

The detonations had ceased for some moments now. The last explosion erupted at the bank of the canal – at the precise instant that Ibrahim ran unseeingly down to it, calling his incessant question: 'De Lesseps? De Lesseps?'

The final blast of the night turned the black water a savage bloody beige. Water and concrete and stone sprayed toward the dark sky, along with bodies that were hurtled like splintered logs upward, twisted and broken.

After a long time they brought Ibrahim's body back to the makeshift headquarters and that's where I encountered it.

For some moments I stood over his remains. I looked down at him, thinking, *the poor son of a bitch.* I remembered what he'd said to me that night at Gheil when he'd deserted me for the greater glory of serving the Vicomte De Lesseps. Ibrahim had said, 'It is written. A man cannot fight against his destiny.'

One could almost believe Ibrahim had died happy, serving the finest of the élite, in the service of the Lion of the Suez himself. He had died looking for his master, trying to be

certain the Vicomte was alive and safe. Ibrahim, of all people, had died a hero's death. He had lived a cringing, unctuous jackal's life, the butt of cruel jokes, disparaged and detested and mistrusted. But he had followed his star, his destiny, to the heights and to the brink of his master's incredible hour of achievement, dying in the service of that master, a small part of the greatest engineering accomplishment of the century . . . .

# XXI

IN THE FIRST brightening of dawn, General Halim Pasha arrived at De Lesseps' headquarters with four of his senior officers, all of them heavily armed.

'We have thrown military guards around the whole area,' Halim said. 'No one is allowed to enter or leave without my written pass.'

De Lesseps nodded tiredly, but Linant Bey spoke in a raging tone. 'Are you not locking the stable door tardily, General?'

'We were infiltrated, M'sieu,' Halim Pasha said. 'But we shall capture all those responsible for this chaos.'

Again De Lesseps only nodded in that tired way.

Halim Pasha winced. 'I deeply regret all that has happened here, Vicomte.'

De Lesseps shook his leonine head. 'It is not your fault.'

'It is my responsibility, Vicomte. I don't try to escape that. I shall make what restitution I can. My men and I shall right the wrong as far as possible . . . . It is on a matter of some importance that I've come to report.'

De Lesseps nodded his head again.

Halim Pasha's face remained agonised with guilt. 'We believed we had the area secured, highness.'

'We all believed that, Halim.' De Lesseps spoke in a fatigued, gentle tone, free of any judgement.

'Some of our guards grew careless. There was no trouble, not even minor disturbances, for so long – '

'I understand – '

'As guards grew careless, workers were allowed to enter the site without being searched or questioned – '

'I understand, Halim.'

'It was in this way that Islamic fanatics were able to smuggle explosives into the compound – '

'Fanatics?' Now De Lesseps straightened in his chair, staring at Halim, his exhaustion forgotten. 'Are you certain this was an attack by Moslem religious fanatics?'

Halim nodded his head. 'Oh, yes. We're sure of that. Shiite fundamentalists. They infiltrated among the workers. They set off the explosives and during the confusion most – or all of them – escaped on stolen horses.'

Now De Lesseps came to his feet, his face bleak and cold. 'You let them escape?'

'On our horses?' Linant Bey demanded.

'We have not *let* these people do *anything*, gentlemen. As soon as we learned of their bold manoeuvre, we sent cavalry forces riding hard in pursuit. We knew the direction the saboteurs had fled. We know they will follow the canal north – at least to the Damascus highway. We are preparing troops now, Vicomte, boarding men on our fastest supply boat. Our plan is to cut the saboteurs off as they ride to the north – to drive them back, if we must, into the waiting guns of my pursuing cavalry.'

'What you are really saying, Halim, is that these saboteurs got an impossible head start on your cavalry?' Linant Bey said.

'I admit nothing of the sort. They shall be overtaken. I came merely to report our plan to the Vicomte,' Halim said.

'Yes. Yes.' There was no longer any trace of weariness about De Lesseps. 'I'll go with you, Halim.' He caught up a thick gunbelt and holster and strapped it about his hips.

I stepped forward as others prepared to follow De Lesseps. 'I'll go, too,' I said.

I did not miss the covert way several of the men glanced at each other, at me and at the Vicomte. For the first time I realised the suspicions directed toward me, and I saw how tenuously I was being tolerated.

De Lesseps glanced toward me. He did not smile. He stared at me for a long beat as if he had never seen me before and then, after a taut moment, he merely shrugged and strode out of the building.

Halim Pasha's strike force was concealed below decks on the supply boat. Only the skipper and three deckhands

showed themselves on deck as the shallow-draft vessel steamed north at ten to twelve knots along the open canal.

De Lesseps was almost serene, calm in his certainty that the swift-moving craft could overtake frightened men on tired, punished horses, no matter how great the head start they had.

We were sardined into the cargo holds of the small boat. Halim Pasha permitted none of his men to speak and there was scarcely room, with the arms and ammunition stored around us, for a man to shift position.

A kind of inner sickness settled over me. This illness had nothing to do with the stale air, the lack of ventilation, the thick smell of smoke, or the men crowded around me below decks. It was a sickness which germinated when I stumbled over Oriana's battered form on that littered mound, when I saw Ibrahim's frail and broken body, and when I glimpsed the suspicion and mistrust in the faces of men I had counted as my friends. I felt isolated, apart from them, unwanted and despised in a suddenly alien place. I could not get Oriana out of my mind. During the long dark night I'd gone a dozen times to the compound infirmary only to be turned away by doctors and nurses. When, once I was able to speak briefly with Dr Hassan Bey, the little man merely spread his hands in a helpless gesture. 'There is nothing I can tell you, M'sieu, because as yet we know nothing. The young woman remains unconscious. She suffers concussions. There are serious internal injuries as well . . . The extent of these injuries is what we don't know – and won't know for some time. What else can I tell you? We do our best . . . the best we know.'

And now superimposed upon my desperation at Oriana's condition and my inability to learn anything at all about how seriously she was injured, there was the sickness every time I looked about at the death and ruin and destruction of this great project.

No one, except Oriana in her hysteria of the moment, had openly accused me of anything, of any complicity in this sabotage, and yet I now saw in their veiled eyes their suspicions and fears and doubts, and I felt in my belly

the beginning of a debilitating sense of guilt.

Even my oldest friends in this place, Linant and Mougel, barely spoke to me and glanced directly at me almost reluctantly. Oriana's father, overwhelmed with grief, avoided me coldly. Yet none of them put their suspicions into accusatory words. They all remained polite, with a deadly kind of courtesy.

I warned myself not to fall prey to delusions of persecution, the sense that others suspected, mistrusted or hated me. I was not even sure yet whether this abrupt chill in their manner rose from their dislike or from their preoccupation with tragic sabotage, the fearful loss and wreckage of fifteen years of heartbreaking labour. Clearly, I had been warmly welcomed and always tolerated before – even as a British subject. Now, perhaps in this despair and ruin, I was the enemy, one of the enemy, and personal innocence or guilt simply had nothing to do with the way these men felt toward me in their agony.

I lounged, my back against the rough weathered beams of a bulkhead, and tried to put all of this ugliness from my mind. This was not the moment for assessing guilt or placing blame. De Lesseps himself seemed barely aware of me. I kept warning myself it had nothing to do with my nationality, or any change in the Vicomte's attitude toward me. Clearly, his whole mind and soul were concentrated on this cruel wreckage of his lifelong dream. He simply had no time for me, whether I were English, guilty of crime against him, or as I knew myself to be, innocent.

I should have been able to shake off the terrible depression that settled down upon me, but I could not . . . .

One of the deckhands sank flat on his belly on the deck and spoke from the hatch. 'Captain's compliments, Vicomte De Lesseps. He sends word we have passed a band of horsemen headed north along the embankment. He awaits your orders.'

De Lesseps nodded. 'Tell the Captain I thank him for this intelligence. Tell him he will please secure the boat in the first *gare* ahead. Our soldiers will disembark there. He is to

stand by, with engines at ready to move again upon order from me or from General Halim Pasha.'

A spark of tension flared and ignited across the soldiers crowded into the hold. Halim Pasha warned again against speaking aloud, or making any unnecessary sounds. 'This order,' he said in a terse cold tone, 'is upon pain of death. Our success or failure here may well depend upon that element of surprise.'

We heard the engines slowed, reversed and then the cargo screw-wheeler moved from the canal, the throb of its engines like the pound of our own hearts. The deckhands tied the craft along the pier.

General Halim Pasha spoke a curt order to disembark and the armed men came up out of the hold, single-file and guns at the ready. They ran across the narrow deck, leaped out to the dock and fell into silent squads in the blazing morning sun.

General Pasha and De Lesseps hurried to the head of the attack force. I carried a handgun gripped in my fist and remained with Pasha's junior officers not directly in command of the squads. I had the strange sense that I was under surveillance, that I was being watched narrowly and that I could get myself killed by making any overt, suspicious or vexatious move. Again I warned myself that I was being unnaturally sensitive. Still, I could not relax, or escape the feeling that I wore a round target in the middle of my back.

We came up quickly from the hold of the boat. The sun rode high now, blazing in a cloudless sky, searing the earth, undoubtedly affecting the hard-ridden horses of the fleeing saboteurs.

Halim Pasha, using hand signals, deployed his men in squads across the dunes, sending them running along the embankment of the canal.

We were only moments ahead of the fugitive vandals. We caught sight of their approach almost at once. The first thing we saw was the way their lathered horses faltered in the intense morning heat.

I heard one of the young officers whisper something to a fellow officer near me. The riders were Islamic

fundamentalists, he said. Men whipped to a frenzy by one of their priests. One could recognise them by their dress. They had planted the explosives; there was no doubt of this.

'Explosives. Yes. But supplied by whom?' another officer asked.

There seemed no certain answer for this.

'This we shall learn when we have taken prisoners,' the young officer whispered.

When the racing horsemen spied the troops which were crouched in lines along crests of dunes and barring their passage, they drew rein, shouting and unsheathing rifles.

In the intense silence I heard General Pasha shout two orders: 'Fire! . . . Charge!'

His commands were obeyed instantly. A riffle of gunfire, petty-sounding in the immense silences of the flat wasteland, erupted in a long, swinging arc.

Reloading, these soldiers leaped up, socking bayonets into place, and ran down slope toward their enemy. Behind us, other troops fired over our heads. I ran with the first wave of soldiers, trying to find a target in the glittering dust and sudden confusion.

Glancing back, I found De Lesseps was in the forefront of the troops, running ahead of General Halim Pasha. The possibility of death obviously never occurred to the Vicomte, or he wanted to display a vivid example of courage for the soldiers. Anyhow, he didn't seem to care whether he lived or died, exposed as he was to gunfire. The nagging thought spun and reeled in my mind: De Lesseps' dream had ended last night in nightmare. Perhaps life was no longer all that attractive to the Lion of the Suez . . . .

The fusillades of gunfire laid down by the soldiers, their lunging charge with their fixed bayonets – as if they presented merely the first flank of a merciless attacking military force – struck terror into the minds of already terrorised men. They were religious fanatics. They were resigned to death. But suddenly faced with soldiers and guns, they lost their appetite for dying, even for a holy cause. The sortie ended as abruptly as it had begun.

I was still trying to locate a target among the hooded

Arabs on horseback when they suddenly and unanimously surrendered.

The horsemen in the forefront of the vandals reacted first. They threw their guns away, raised their arms high above their heads and wailed in a terrible religiosity their desire to submit and to go on breathing the hot desert air.

'Don't kill us,' they screamed. 'Don't kill us.'

Their fear spread like contagion back over their fellows. Guns were abandoned as hateful instruments, thrown into the sand.

It was several minutes after the saboteurs began to surrender that General Halim Pasha finally recognised their frenzied capitulation. By the time he shouted his order to cease fire, half-a-dozen of the vandals had been slain, struck by dozens of bullets from the soldiers' guns. Clearly, there was to be no mercy shown by the captors.

The survivors were quickly rounded up, disarmed, relieved of their stolen mounts, and shackled. Halim Pasha ordered them led out upon the open pier where they were questioned.

General Pasha and his senior officers interrogated the prisoners for less than three minutes when the General suddenly spat in contempt full in the face of one of them, obviously their leader and spokesman.

Pasha heeled around, turning his back on his prisoners. He strode to where De Lesseps stood, slack-shouldered, watching, his handgun still clutched, unnoted, in his fist.

'These men are not religious fanatics,' Halim Pasha said. His nostrils distended as if he were nauseated. 'At least they are not Moslem fanatics. They are not Arabs at all. They are dressed to look like Shiite fundamentalists but they are not Islamic. They are Turks. All Turks. They are all Turks.'

I staggered slightly, as if I had been struck brutally and unexpectedly in the solar plexus. I felt as if the breath had been driven from me. My legs went weak. *They are Turks. They are dressed to look like Shiite fundamentalist fanatics. But they are Turks.*

In whose fertile mind had this inhuman plot been hatched? I swallowed back the bile that gorged up in my throat.

I stood, unable to move, thinking only that I was seeing my own plan carried out, as certainly as though I had nurtured it from inception to that moment when the first explosives ripped apart that canal.

'I was sure of it,' I heard De Lesseps say in a flat, unastonished tone. 'I am not surprised to hear this, General.'

General Halim Pasha's face was contorted with his savage rage. His voice was carefully controlled. 'Do we return these prisoners to Cairo for trial?'

De Lesseps drew a deep breath. I saw the savagery flash in his eyes. He shrugged. 'Why? Why should we take them anywhere? We know their guilt. They know they are guilty. They knew they would be executed if they were captured. Well, they have been captured. The Turkish government – and their friends – know their guilt . . . No. General, I suggest we take them nowhere. Execute them. Now. Leave their bodies for the jackals.'

# XXII

WE RETURNED TO the demoralised camp. I leaped from the boat as its hands were tying her up at the pier and ran through the compound to the infirmary. Here, I was turned away coldly. No, Dr Hassan Bey would not see me. No, there was no new report on the condition of the Mademoiselle Ducelle. She remained unconscious. No, no one could say when I might hope to see her, or when I might confer with Dr Hassan Bey.

Raging inwardly, I turned away and walked through the wreckage.

Those saboteur's explosives had abruptly changed the whole concept for the future of this canal, it seemed to me. In a few hours from a landscape of order and strength, the place had been reduced to a shambles. Little discipline remained among the workers on the compound. The canal itself lay shattered. The channel was a broken ditch filled with stagnant water and on its dust-covered, debris-littered surface bloated bodies and shattered materials floated. Across the compound, people died suddenly as open wounds were complicated by outbreaks of cholera, gangrene and dysentery which the doctors treated ineffectually with what medical means remained at hand to them. In those cement houses and buildings left standing intact, great acres of strange mildew spread on walls, bedclothes, floors and carpeting, like some nourished and obscene growth. Small fires were kept blazing continually to dry clothing and bedding and to boil all water used for human and animal consumption.

Insects appeared in countless millions. At times nettings, screens and any flat surfaces were matted and moiling with the swollen blue bodies. All day they swarmed in black

clouds over every open thing, almost suffocating, stifling – and always nauseating.

As fear of new explosions and the alarm and terror abated, repair of the canal was undertaken at once. When word spread across the encampment that the saboteurs had been captured and identified as Turks dressed as Shiite religious protestors, that these invaders had been condemned and executed on the spot, the whole compound suddenly found new life within itself. Men rushed out of their tents, stables or housing, elated by the news, inspired and reassured by the information that foreign mercenaries and not their own people were guilty of this carnage, hopeful again. They milled, ready for work orders which, strangely, did not come at once from De Lesseps or his senior engineers.

Workers at the canal kept moving out into the broken channel. The rancid water washed up about their waists. One could see the terror in their eyes, but even in this mortal funk, they continued to struggle against the mud and that peril of unseen craters. There was almost no current any more, only a feeble wave now and then, crested with the gray scum of filthy wash-water, but enough to force them back a step or two in their timidity. The conduit toward Pelisium was thick with mire and great chunks of concrete. It was a dead and ruined gorge which the interminable desert had begun already to reclaim as its own, its brown, deathly stillnesses moving inexorably back in over everything . . . .

Among the ruins of buildings and demolished machinery flung across the compound, narrow pathways were cleared through the debris, just wide enough for supply carts and beast-trains to pass. I walked slowly through this gutted workyard, avoiding the deep craters of stagnant water that stood everywhere in broken hollows.

Sickness gorged up in me. It was still almost impossible to believe the extent of the damage, the wide areas laid waste in such a short, nightmarish attack. But it had been real and its scars showed everywhere. Often, where the fragment of a roof or crumpled wall remained, I would catch a brief and chilling glimpse of a mindless face, with wide black eyes

peering out from some fragmented inner sanctuary upon the ruined and rejected world.

I tried to stay away but returned a dozen times that morning to the hospital. Here my way was barred by two aged women who turned away all visitors, all inquiries, with steady, palsy-like shaking of black-hooded heads. Somehow in my mind they began to look like crones from hell. I walked back through piles of mortar and stone which could no longer even be identified as some once-imposing standing structure vital to this scuttled operation.

I climbed over the rubbish and found myself at the open flap of that tent where only last night – an eternity in the lost past – I had eaten dinner with the Vicomte De Lesseps and emerged anxiously to find Oriana awaiting me.

Pausing in the blaze of sunlight just outside the lip of the tent, I heard the empty sound of broken breathing, not quite audible sobs, but a lost and deeply repressed wailing which could no longer be held totally inside a shattered heart.

Troubled, even feeling hackles rise across the nape of my neck, I stepped inside the shadowed tent and then stopped within the rectangle of sunlight, as if poled.

I saw De Lesseps crouched on a sodden, stained carpeting somehow like a deistical prayer rug. He crumpled, half-sprawled, as if he had fallen in heart failure, and yet he was kneeling, as if praying in the manner of the devoutest Islam.

He had his head buried in his arms as if he were being cruelly beaten about the head and shoulders and could no longer endure the pain nor defend himself from it. I did not see the face of the ageing Lion, nor the look of agony and tragic loss in his eyes. But I did not need to see his face to assay his anguish. His failure and despair were evident all around me, in the smell of death, the clouds of blue-bellied insects, the distant wailing that rose from mouths of maimed and dying people he had gathered here in the name of human progress.

'Vicomte,' I said.

I saw the crouched body stiffen. For a long beat, De Lesseps remained unmoving as if, somehow, I might prove to be unreal, might disappear as his obsessive dream had dissolved. For that moment, only the tragedy of his hopeless

situation had any true reality in his mind. He went on crouching there, as if he no longer had that incredible inner strength that kept him scrambling back to his feet no matter how many times he was knocked down.

I felt a rushing of illness deeper than any I had ever known before. I was seeing an invincible giant brought low, a proud and exalted leader humbled in defeat. One might even have come to believe him a superman, arrogant in his invincibility. But as he crouched there, beaten and demoralised, I shuddered, sickened with the rush of shame and guilt – not that I had contributed to his defeat – but at having come upon him like this, at seeing how vulnerable and broken he was, at last. I wished to all the gods that I had retreated at once and left him to his private hell, but it was even too late for that. I could escape none of it.

'Vicomte,' I said again. 'Are you all right? Is there anything I can do?'

*My God,* cried the voice inside me, *haven't you done enough*?

De Lesseps straightened slowly then, but remained where he was, on his knees.

He turned his leonine head and peered at me from reddened, faded eyes which seemed suddenly sunken in their sockets, the eyes of an old, tired and broken man.

I swallowed back the bile gorging up in my throat. De Lesseps, who had always looked youthful, strong, magnificently ageless, suddenly seemed older than the first gods assigned to Olympus. His graying hair stood wild about his face. He had run his hands through it, he had clutched at it as if to pull it from its roots, somehow to relieve the torment inside his brain.

His swarthy face was lined, pulled down and gray with agony, with deep indentations about his slack lips. He did not look merely old, he looked fatigued – mortally exhausted. There seemed nothing left of the distinguished, impregnable, obsessed and audacious zealot except an empty corpse which could not reasonably be interred until he stopped pulling breath into his played-out lungs.

'Are you all right?' I said again.

He stared at me, his lifeless eyes dead and cold, as if he

had never seen me before. 'What do you want?'

'I want to help you – if I can.'

'Help me?' A shudder wracked his body. 'Why do you think I need your help?'

I winced. 'I'm sorry, sir . . . I couldn't help overhearing your – grief.'

'You could have gone away and let me alone.'

'No. Maybe I should have, but I couldn't.'

'What do you want?'

There was no answer for this. Suddenly, it was as if he were asking me – as Lord Stoppard had asked me – what was I doing here in the enemy camp?

What was I doing here? Had I come to see it finally reduced to shambles? Was that what I had wanted?

I glanced about the ruins. I thought about Oriana, and even my love for her was no answer. It was as if I had been lying to myself for fifteen years, as if there were no truth in anything I had told myself in my conscious mind. I had not lied only to others, but most of all to myself.

Why was I here? What did I truly want in this place? Why had I involuntarily returned again and again, never truly helpful to De Lesseps and his cause, and yet never faithful to my own nation's goals, either?

It was De Lesseps who had been struck down, but it was I who suffered defeat with him in ways I barely understood in that moment. I had reached that low place toward which it seemed I had been racing all my life. I was being forced to see myself for what I was and what I was not.

I stared at De Lesseps in his ruin, and yet it was my own failure that I was forced to confront. I was looking at De Lesseps in his anguish and exhaustion and final ruin but it was my own infirmities and dereliction I was being made to face. I admitted now that I had betrayed Oriana and De Lesseps, failed all these people I'd allowed to call me friend. I had been nobody's friend, not even an honest messenger of my own Queen, because now I saw that all along, from the first moment out here, I had seen in this magnificent ditch across Suez the same international promise and global prospects as had De Lesseps himself. I had lacked the guts to speak out in his behalf, and yet I had known inside that he

was right and his opponents stupid and blind and wrong.

I had not even really thought how I might somehow present the truth of De Lesseps' cause to my own government. I had considered only how I could keep my mouth shut and hurt either side as little as possible. I had not looked ahead to the opening of this great canal, but to the selfish flowering of my own career in the foreign service.

I shuddered at my own dishonesty. Perhaps in those years I had many times been forced to admit maritime progress required the opening of the Suez canal, but had it ever once occurred to me to stand against my superiors in my own government and to speak what I perceived to be the truth – De Lesseps' truth?

No. I saw clearly what I had done, from the first, all the way to that moment when pressed into a corner I had suggested using religious protest against De Lesseps' canal across Suez. Had I even really believed such a course would be effective, or that my superiors would put such a plan into operation?

I admitted at last what I had thought. I had thought I was rapidly rising toward the pinnacle of my career. I was going upward in a mobility hardly known among commoners in the service. And this pinnacle I saw was also my crossroads. My past excellence of service would be worthless if there could be proof provided that I had openly – or even covertly – opposed bureaucratic, parliamentary and governmental policy toward De Lesseps, the Suez Canal project and even the French themselves and what they were trying to do. Knighthood or ruin loomed ahead of me and I had chosen the safe and reasonable path. I had lied to everybody, but most of all to myself.

From my first meeting with De Lesseps I had admired him as one looks up to his ablest gods. But I had not wanted to. I had wanted to see him as wilful, arrogant, fanatical and inflexible. That was the way I saw him because I forced myself to see him in that dark light.

Seeing him struck down, humbled, I was agonised for him and for myself. What I had seen as wilful arrogance was total commitment, involvement and devotion. And I admitted this now when it was too late for either of us. I had

never seen a man so dedicated before. He was obsessed with his dream – pledged to a magnificent programme for human betterment that I in my stolid pragmatism forced myself to see as self-aggrandisement and even fraud. I had been totally incapable of understanding the greatness of his soul. What would indeed have been insolence and assumption of infallibility in me or in most men, was something else indeed in a man who did not even think in such petty and negative terms, a man who, rather than considering himself in these self-important ways, never thought of himself at all! There was about him that fanaticism of the true saint. There was in him a naiveté that was sublimely beautiful. He *actually* believed the copy-book maxims of good and evil. And himself he saw as neither good nor evil, he didn't stop to think about himself selfishly at all. He saw only what he tried to do as good and anything that opposed it as wrong-minded and evil.

It was all so simple, so complex, so open-hearted and sincere, so convoluted and twisted, that only the pure in heart could discern what this poor humbled and beaten man was all about.

No wonder I had been blind in my perception of him. I had not wanted to believe good of him or his works. To find a simple, honest and dedicated man upset all my preconceptions. I saw him, not as he was, but as I thought he was, as I would have been in his place.

But now I faced the truth, not only about Ferdinand De Lesseps, but about myself. What I had seen as arrogance had been dedication, devotion, and a naive belief in the rightness of God's world, in the reward of good, the punishment of evil. How blind I had been. I who prided myself on my sensitivity, how insensitive I had been proved.

'You must not surrender,' I heard myself saying.

'Surrender?'

'I know that this looks like the end. I can see how you would see all you have done as finished.'

He shook his head, like a man who had been struck sharply at the point of his jaw, as though clearing cobwebs from his mind.

'Finished? I'm not finished.'

'Of course you're not.'

He did not move but he stared at me with an awful rage that was as near as he ever came to accusing me of working against him. 'No one is strong enough to *finish* me,' he said. 'No one. No country. No nation. No complicity of nations. I have a job and I shall do it.'

'I'm sorry. When I saw you – there on the ground – I thought – '

'I am not beaten. I am exhausted. For the moment I am tired, that is all. Every man gets tired sometime.'

'Of course, sir.'

'I am very tired, that is all. But do not think – they – have stopped me. Nothing on this earth will stop me, Englishman. Nothing. Nobody. You saw me very tired, that is all. But am I beaten? No. No more today than last year. No more than five years ago. Ten. Fifteen. What is being done here is greater than any of us, and what happens to us does not matter. Only this project matters. Only completing this canal and opening it to the ships of all nations. Only this matters, English.'

'I'm sorry. I thought you would be forced to stop.'

'Stop? How can we stop now, English? We must go on. Money? I'll get the money, but no matter, we must go on. I am tired at this moment, but I am not stopped. It is not over yet. This ditch between two seas. Nothing. Nothing can stop that. Don't you see?'

I nodded. At last, I saw. How I hated myself for the way I had viewed De Lesseps as opportunist, a promoter planning to enrich himself beyond measure from this project, sacrificing everything and everybody to it. It was himself he had sacrificed. He had clutched this thing between his jaws as some pit bull might, and only death itself would relieve him of it, and not even death. His canal would be opened, whether he lived or died, because it was for human good, and he believed in the power of good.

He remained crouched on that sodden rug upon his knees, a defeated man, bankrupt, broken, savaged by his former friends, who did not even realise he was beaten. There he sagged, unchanged in only one way: his head was unbowed. His course remained unaltered because he could not admit

defeat. He couldn't even recognise it! When he found the strength, he would get to his feet again, and plod forward, against all odds, against all men and all gods who would stop him . . . .

*Part Five*

# PORT SAID, 1869

# XXIII

DR HASSAN BEY refused again to see me.

I went directly from De Lesseps' shambles of a tent to the compound infirmary where the very stench of death and despair increased by the hour as the sun blazed higher towards the apex of the cloudless sky.

I walked slowly through the desolation. I saw it all in a new and inwardly devastating way. It was as if I personally had supplied those Turkish mercenaries with the explosives they needed to reduce this project to rubble. I certainly had provided British Intelligence with the approach to sabotage – religious protest; at least a savage attack made to resemble fanatic religious protesting.

I shuddered. I had played the bureaucratic game of politics, even when I'd known deep inside my mind that I was wrong, they were wrong and British policy itself was in total error.

I forced myself to witness in all its ugly ruin the fruits of destruction. It was destruction of my own making. I could not escape this truth. I had lost Oriana, driven her from me. I had caused Ibrahim's death and De Lesseps' despair. I had laid this place in ruins as surely as though I had planted the explosives – oh, not in any actions I had taken, I had blithely assured myself I was aloof to all that – but through my lying – to myself, to Oriana, to De Lesseps and to my foreign service superiors. Perhaps I could have done nothing to advance the fortunes of the canal project. Perhaps I could never have convinced the British parliament of the value of the canal across the Suez to England and her colonies. But I could have spoken out. I could have joined that small, élite group who did dare to speak up for progress and for British involvement. God knew, Disraeli had spoken out for British

participation in mid-east development more than twenty years ago. I found myself remembering the way Eugenie and I had sat, enthralled, while Disraeli harangued the parliament about its short-sighted policies in Egypt.

But I had not spoken out. I had smiled and lied and played the politically safe hand, and I had laid this place in ruins. I had killed innocent people. I had helped destroy one of the greatest of man's achievements since time began, and I had shattered the brilliant and selfless man who had accomplished this miracle in the desert.

I could not pretend that British Intelligence in their stolid and rigid-minded wisdom would not have found some means for opposing this canal, even violently. They most surely would have. On the other hand, I could not fail to realise that they had used my plan – to the letter – and that it had succeeded – agonisingly.

I was guilty of vicious wrong against people who had trusted me and loved me and welcomed me among them and believed only the best of me.

I wanted to rage out with the sickness churning deep inside me like some fatal, festering cancer. I wanted only one thing as I strode across that blighted compound, I wanted a second chance, an opportunity to undo my insufferable wrongs.

At the hospital, I asked the two ugly old crones from hell if I could see Dr Hassan Bey. They only shook their heads. The doctor had left strict orders. He was not to be disturbed at his work for any reason, for anyone.

'I've got to see him,' I said. My voice shook.

They only stared up at me bleakly, their aged eyes dry and empty.

I gazed back at them, hating them. I said, 'Will you at least take a message from me to Dr Hassan Bey?'

They did not nod their heads or even change their expressions and yet they seemed to have softened, at least waiting to hear what message I wanted conveyed to the harried doctor.

'Will you tell Dr Hassan Bey,' I said, 'that I will camp here? That I will stay here in this place, in this path, until he agrees to talk to me for at least one minute. One minute. If I

am removed forcibly, I shall return. I will be here until he agrees to see me. Will you tell him that?'

They gazed up at me for a moment and then looked at each other. One of the ancient crones shrugged her bony shoulders inside her greasy chador. She turned and minced her way through the narrow aisles of cots to the loud belly of the place.

When finally she returned, she merely stared up at me and shook her head. Then she resumed her place, a watcher at the gates of hell.

I stood there, helpless with rage. I considered thrusting my way into the interior of the infirmary, pushing forward until I found Hassan Bey, until I learned something about Oriana's condition.

Someone said, 'M'sieur Hamilton?'

With a sense of relief flooding through me, I saw Ducelle striding towards me between the tightly lined cots.

I took his hand. He seemed reluctant even to touch me, but I was too sick with grief and remorse to care about amenities. 'Oriana,' I said. 'I can't find out anything about her.'

Ducelle withdrew his hand and shook his head, his face grave. 'There is nothing to tell you. They don't know anything yet. Not for sure.'

'My God! When will they know?'

'That is in the hands of God, M'sieur,' Ducelle said.

The two crones nodded and began to chant, 'Allah akbar. Allah akbar.'

'Allah akbar,' Ducelle intoned, nodding.

'If God is so damned great,' I raged. 'Why can't they do something for Oriana?'

'They are doing all they can, M'sieur,' Ducelle said.

'I know. All they know. They told me that. But I want to know how Oriana is – '

'Her condition is poor, M'sieur Hamilton,' Ducelle said. 'According to the doctors her prognosis is – less than hopeful.'

'My God. You talk as if she is dying.'

'She is alive. But they say there is little chance she will ever – walk again.' His husky voice broke.

I felt as if I had been struck brutally below the belt. 'May I please see her?'

Ducelle met my gaze. He did not smile. He shook his head. 'It would not help, M'sieur.'

'It would help me. I need just to see her. To speak to her.'

'This would upset her, M'sieur. Seeing you. It would be very detrimental for her.'

'Why?'

'Because, M'sieur, while I wish I did not have to say this to you, Oriana becomes most distraught at the mention of your name.'

'Perhaps because she wants to see me – '

'I don't think so, M'sieur – '

'I just want to say to her – '

'It does not matter what you wish to say to her, M'sieur. Whatever it is, M'sieur Hamilton, it would not help. We could not permit it . . . You may as well know . . . it is Oriana's own decision . . . She does not wish to see you.'

'Allah akbar. Allah akbar,' chanted the crones.

I travelled from Alexandria to London in near record-breaking time. I went by way of Marseilles and Paris in only a week.

My inquiries as to the swiftest conveyance north across the Mediterranean found me the British cargo vessel, *Wellington*. The freighter proved not to be named for the heroic Wellington at all, but for Herbert B who was head of the shipping firm. But the craft was sleek and swift and it stood in the roads off shore, ready to steam out when I boarded her, and this was what I wanted.

I went aboard the *Wellington* and locked myself in a small stateroom with ink, pens, paper and pots of Egyptian coffee.

Working without rest, I created a paper which I named 'Seventy Reasons Why Britain Should Support the Suez Canal Programme'.

I did not reach the number seventy arbitrarily. Upon first, white-hot writing, I produced thirty-five unassailable reasons why sanity, profit and all logic dictated that Great Britain had much to gain by aligning herself in all haste with

the Universal Company. I knew there had to be at least twice that number of excellent motives for supporting and financing the canal project. I knew that every reason didn't have to be unassailable; once auditors were hooked, they would swallow all the bait. I knew this from my long career in foreign service.

I wrote and rewrote those seventy reasons, making my presentation as concise as possible, as infallible as possible. I worked, sweated, in a frenzy until I had the paper as letter-perfect as I could make it.

I arrived at Victoria Station by boat train from Dover. I found lodgings at once and immediately began setting up appointments inside the bureaucracy. I found myself with a great deal of time on my hands, and little to be optimistic about. Next to the law's delay, the most frustrating of all situations is bureaucratic deliberation. I found myself at the moment of my greatest need with no strings to pull, no magic names to invoke. I simply had to keep pounding my head against that wall of governmental indifference.

As the poet said, it was good to be in England again. There was excitement and the deep stirring of nostalgia crackling in the soft gray atmosphere shot through with the wan sunlight of London afternoons, even for me, even as deeply preoccupied as I was. It was the sunlight and the atmosphere of other afternoons, different and yet how much the same. Still, seeing petty government officials entails as much waiting as seeing. And so I loitered along The Mall. I watched the murky little scows plying both ways along the Thames, in such a rush to nowhere. There was a sameness about the town. I could not see that things had changed all that much since I'd been away. Perhaps nothing ever changed in London except the names and the faces, and the more they changed, the more alike they were, like flower faces in a bunch. Maybe nothing had changed since the town rebuilt itself after its disastrous fire, or since the days when those tolling bells kept calling Dick Whittington back to his destiny. Bloomsbury Square and the Charing Cross Road seemed eternally crowded and rushed. Lovers still kissed in the shadow of Waterloo Bridge. Men and women of all ages

and sizes hurried in flurries of humanity into the offices and shops and stalls of Russell Square. I found the reassuring old urgency, permanence, strength and affluence about the eternal town. I drank it all in, walking from Kensington Palace to the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Westminster, and Regents Park. I was touched anew by the solemn beauty of it all, and made hopeful by the wealth of the Empire. It was this I had come to England to find.

I admitted I was not going to discover the kind of support and assistance I needed within the bureaucracy. There was no single name of such strength and influence that the right doors would open for me. There was only one name I could invoke or depend upon, that was my own.

I returned to my lodgings and began what I wanted to be a short, concise but irresistible letter to Disraeli who had become Prime Minister when Lord Derby retired in February of 1868.

Realising I was getting nowhere nibbling at the edges of bureaucracy, knocking at Parliamentary doors and flattering stupid politicians, I aimed directly at the top, number ten Downing Street.

I went over that letter and its seventy reasons for British co-operation in the Suez canal project until I awoke from deep sleep, half-consciously reciting them.

God knew, I realised a brief, one-page letter setting forth my reason for wishing an audience with the Prime Minister would be more likely to get Disraeli's attention, but I could not put the words down in less than two pages.

I hand-delivered the letter. I was able upon that first visit to speak with an under secretary. This gentleman was less than reassuring. It did not matter. I wanted to be heard, not reassured.

I arrived at Downing Street at nine each morning, along with the civil servants and the lower echelons of government. I sent in my name to the Prime Minister's secretary and I waited.

At the end of the first week I wrote a second letter to the Prime Minister. This one was briefer, but more passionate, more demanding. I now realised I had nothing to lose.

By now I was recognised as the token eccentric of the

establishment. I was able to get my second letter directly to Disraeli's own private secretary with the promise that the Prime Minister himself would read it.

The next morning at nine-thirty a fat-faced young secretary came out into the public waiting room and told me that I would have an appointment of ten minutes with the Prime Minister between one and two p.m. that afternoon.

I returned to my chair and sat down to wait.

At a little past three o'clock that afternoon I was still sitting in that anteroom. When the fat-faced young secretary emerged and spoke my name, I think he betrayed just the faintest flicker of surprise to find me waiting.

I was, eventually, ushered into the presence of the Prime Minister himself. Disraeli was not as tall as I'd believed him to be, and in ways uglier, and older. There was something arrogant about his large, protruberant black eyes. The very way they regarded one seemed an open challenge. Despite the fact that he'd been born in England, third generation, in fact, baptised in the Church of England, there remained about him that lingering exotic, oriental quality of his ancestry which he could never escape, no matter how valiantly he attempted to be the most English of Englishmen.

To my astonishment I found that the Prime Minister had not only my second letter, but from somewhere in the files my first epistle as well, in front of him on his desk. Unabashed, I placed before him my voluminous document, Seventy Reasons.

He glanced up and let his faint illusory smile tweak at me. 'You've had quite a wait, cooling your heels out there.'

'If you mean I've had plenty of time to contemplate what the foreign service will do because I came directly to you – '

'Well, we can let me worry about that, Hamilton. I'm impressed. Yes, damned impressed.'

'Thank you.'

'There is no doubt you feel quite strongly – '

'I'm prepared to do what I must, sir. We've been wrong about this. All of us. It is a grave error. It must be atoned.'

'I see.' He glanced, quickly at first, through my treatise

on the canal and its promise for British future. He flipped the pages, scanning. He would pause, suck at his full underlip, reading, and then flip the pages again.

In the silence, I muttered something about having read his novels.

He glanced up from my thesis and waved his beringed hand deprecatingly. 'When would you do such a time-wasting thing? While you sat in my anteroom?'

'Well,' I said. 'I had the time out there.'

But he seemed not to hear me, to have no more time for small talk. He had returned to the first of my documents and sat seriously perusing it.

Three hours later, the building was quiet, sighing in the silence of departed people, settling for the evening. But Disraeli and I remained in that office.

'You've been able, Hamilton, to do something I was never able to do.'

'What is that, sir?'

'You've distilled it. You've put it all on paper. One can see you have lived with this for a long time. One can see how much it means to you. It is a marvellous thing you've done. Selfless. Courageous.'

'I have been close to it. Perhaps I have only seen what all of us could have seen given the opportunity.'

He smiled and shook his head. 'You are only one of many who have been intimately concerned in this business, Hamilton. You are the only one I've met who did not see only what his superiors told him to see.'

I had to laugh. 'Oh, I saw that, sir. But I also saw the truth – whether I wanted to or not.'

'Well, you've furnished me the ammunition I've long wanted, my boy. I could not have done better, even if I'd had the time. Oh, I had the heart for it. I saw what you see. But what I didn't have is what you have provided me – something I have sadly lacked until this moment. The unanswerable arguments. That's what you've set down. Unanswerable arguments. Oh, my God will I love to appear before Parliament with these arguments in my fist. There won't be a dry eye in the house – except perhaps Gladstone's. He hates me so fiercely, I think he stops

listening when he sees me get up from my chair.' He sat gripping the document in his fist. 'You've brought the answers home to me. All the way from Port Said. I think few men but you and I understand their importance. But they will, Hamilton. Before we are through with them, they will see it all – just as we want them to see it.'

I nodded. Then I told him of the last explosion – an attack by Turkish mercenaries – of the unbelievable disaster to that magnificent ditch at the very moment when neither Egypt nor the Second Empire could afford to extend further credit. 'But De Lesseps will finish that ditch,' I said. 'He may well be a mad man, as we are told in English editorials, but he will finish that canal, and he will open it to international traffic. I am convinced of this. On his knees and scratching with his fingernails if he must, he will finish it.'

'Then you are really here for more than a reversal of policy and our national blessing?'

I nodded, my face gray. 'Much more than that, sir. Much more.'

Disraeli smiled oddly. 'So you say British Intelligence finally has this De Lesseps where we want him – up his canal without a paddle – and it is time to bail him out.'

'As quickly as possible, sir. Yes. The point is, we should benefit. We shall benefit. But we should co-operate to open that canal as quickly as possible. That's what's important now. Not whether we help De Lesseps or not. Whether we come to his rescue or not, he'll somehow dig his ditch and open it. But it will be to our profit and our honour to support him now when he needs us desperately. This is what will set us apart in the community of nations. For us to join him now – with as much financial assistance as possible – and as quickly as possible. Whatever wrongs were committed in the past – whatever mistakes made – they would be atoned.'

During the next weeks I was often in Disraeli's office, six, ten and twelve times a week. The people in the anteroom came to smile when they saw me and bow me through.

I sat at conferences with financial people, with the same British Intelligence who had finally received a suggestion of religious protest from a foreign service underling, discussed

and implemented and executed it. Nobody spoke of that inglorious episode. It was as though it had never happened, as if it were totally expunged from the national mind and the national conscience.

And at last came the day when Disraeli called me into his office alone. He shook my hand and then both my hands. 'We are embarked upon that course of expansionism, growth and progress that I've been preaching almost as long as I can remember, my boy. The canal shall be the visible symbol of our victory and our new departure.'

My eyes brimmed with tears. I hated the display of weakness, but I could not help it. I was almost overcome with exhaustion, with the final sense of victory, not over outside opponents, but over my own inner weaknesses. For once in my life I had done precisely what I ought to have done, not what was expedient or popular or promising.

He clapped me on my shoulder. 'I've heard a great deal of talk about you lately, Tony . . . Strange, isn't it, that all one hears is the pleasant things about a man who has won a great victory. I hear that your name has been sent up for knighthood . . . I think I can promise you that little bauble without a great deal of delay . . .' He grinned wickedly. 'I often have the ear of the Queen herself, you know. She loves to knight tall, handsome young men.'

I shook my head. 'I didn't do any of this to profit from.'

'Why shouldn't you collect? Everyone else will. Knighthood. It can't hurt. Relax and enjoy it as a very dear lady used to say to me when I was younger . . . Well, I have my own payment for you. I have directed that you be given the assignment of going to Vicomte De Lesseps in the name of Her Majesty's Government. You will be directed to inform the gentleman that we in England agree to provide all assistance, monetary, moral and diplomatic that he will require to finish digging and opening his ditch.'

# XXIV

*November 17, 1869 . . .*

This was the date chosen to mark the opening of the Suez Canal, called internationally the century's greatest engineering feat.

For this brief moment, Port Said was the centre of the universe. The notables, royalty, celebrities, infamous and the rulers of the rulers of the world gathered to pay homage to France, its Empress Eugenie, its Emperor Napoleon III and to Ferdinand de Lesseps, *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honeur.*

De Lesseps was the man of the hour. He had overcome all adversity, swept aside every obstacle, brought victory from defeat. Now his waterway across eighty miles of mid-East desert was to be opened to world commerce. A parade of ships, led by the Empress Eugenie's imperial yacht, *l'Aigle* would make the fourteen hour miracle-journey to the Red Sea.

For days ahead of time the harbour of Port Said was choked with fleets of warships, carriers, yachts and merchant vessels – Austrian ironclads, British and Italian steamers, American cruisers, Russian destroyers, Prussian, Swedish and Spanish merchants. All lay at anchor, the atmosphere crackling with expectancy. The colours of a hundred nations flew and slapped and bristled in the wind.

As honoured guest of Ismael Said, Khedive of Egypt, Ferdinand De Lesseps arrived in the middle of the morning of the 17th. I had not seen him since that brief, formal interview long months ago. I felt constraint at seeing the Vicomte again. We who once had been at ease in each other's company, I wondered now how would we behave? What would we have to say now, one to the other?

I found an invitation to join Vicomte De Lesseps and his party aboard the state yacht of Egypt, the *Mahroussieh*, lying at anchor in the harbour.

De Lesseps was alone in his stateroom when I was ushered in. Clouds of blue cigar smoke wreathing the bulkhead told me the room had been emptied only moments before my arrival.

He stood up and clasped his arms about me warmly. 'I thought it would be nice for us to chat a moment in private.'

'That was most thoughtful, Vicomte.'

'Sir Anthony Hamilton,' he said smiling. 'Yes. I like the ring of it.'

'Much has happened to both of us,' I said.

I don't know what I expected De Lesseps to say. I had brought him word, as directed by Disraeli, of British support. He had accepted that information without emotion. Perhaps even if he had looked surprised, pleased or relieved, I may have felt repaid. And then it occurred to me I had not wanted repayment. I wanted to make restitution for wrong. I had not wanted De Lesseps to express gratitude.

But he had been quite restrained when told he would receive from England whatever assistance he required to complete the canal project. It was as if he had known with the Bedouin faithful, help would come from somewhere. The jackals would feed you.

At last he had nodded. 'That's good news, Tony. Isn't it? It will make it all so much easier for us, won't it?'

I smiled faintly. 'I think it will be nice to order new cranes and ploughs and dredgers in any size, shape or price range. Yes.'

He nodded. 'We have worked hard and long, haven't we? And now we have won.'

I stared at him. '*We* have not won. You have won. My God, man. After all that has happened here, don't you know England has opposed you all these years – and that means *I* have opposed you?'

'Have you?' He gave me a faint, abstracted smile. 'Have you, Tony? Well, not seriously. A man like you. Down here. You'd have to see how this canal will bring profit and glory to your country – to all nations.'

'Don't make me a speech,' I said.

He almost smiled. 'I suppose I do run on at times, don't I? Obsessed. An old man obsessed.'

I shrugged.

'Getting old,' he decided. 'That's what it is: My God, the years I've spent on this ditch. The tears. The sweat. Just the lies alone would sink a ship or float a loan, eh? . . . But I regret nothing. It had to be done. I just had to keep at it. That was all. Keep everybody at it, eh? Whether they felt like it or not. Whether I felt like it or not.'

I heard myself saying something I never thought I'd say: 'You did a magnificent job. Magnificent. And those people waiting to pay homage to you. They are all right about you, Vicomte.'

'Are they?' he said. 'Even the Americans? Are they right now when I rank just below or just above Joan of Arc – depending on whether it is a morning or an afternoon paper. Or were they right when they portrayed me as a knave, a fool, a charlatan?'

I laughed. 'They just didn't know you,' I said. 'Anyway, what anyone said no longer matters. You are at last the toast of the civilised world . . . And you've earned it all, whatever honours they decide to pay you.'

'I'm pretty tired,' he said, 'to be weighted down with honours.'

'Relax and enjoy it, as a lovely lady used to say to Prime Minister Disraeli. Relax and enjoy, Vicomte. You have my word. You are an extraordinary man. A genius.'

His swarthy face reddened faintly. He looked almost self-conscious, as nearly embarrassed as he ever could. He shrugged it all off. 'One does what one has to do in this life. That's all . . . .'

I wanted to ask De Lesseps about Oriana, but I did not. He did not bring her name up, and I refrained from inquiring. I had not seen or heard from Oriana since the night I carried her in my arms to the encampment hospital and entrusted her to Dr Hassan Bey.

Upon my return to Egypt from London on official orders, the moment I reached De Lesseps' headquarters, I went

directly to the infirmary, even before I delivered the Prime Minister's fiscal message to the Vicomte. I felt that even if Disraeli wouldn't forgive me, at least De Lesseps might, and if he did not, God, I was certain, would understand.

This time, Dr Hassan Bey agreed to see me. I was ushered into his crib of an office. The place smelled acridly of disinfectant. The infirmary was no longer overcrowded. The numbers of ill, maimed and dying had – through attrition, I'm afraid – been brought to a manageable quota. The little doctor was still rushed, distracted, brusque, but at least he heard my questions.

He did not bother to smile upon meeting me. He shook his head. 'No. Mademoiselle Ducelle is no longer here in this hospital.'

'Is she recovered?'

'Hardly.'

'Where is she?'

'The Mademoiselle has been removed to a hospital in Port Said where specialists might study her.'

'What is her true condition?'

He spread his hands. 'One has not heard since her removal from this infirmary to the facility at Port Said. One hopes for the best. However, I must tell you. Again. The prognosis, at best, is far less than promising. The Mademoiselle Ducelle very likely will never walk again.'

'I can't accept that – '

'Only a miracle. I tell you, it is beyond the knowledge of science today – '

'I won't accept it. Until I have talked to her. To her new doctors. To the specialists.'

Dr Hassan Bey shrugged. 'That is up to you. That is your own decision. I must, because of my position, advise only one course for you, M'sieur.'

'Yes?'

'Caution.'

'Caution?'

'Part of the patient's problem is emotional. We are sure of it. Even if we cannot understand it, or isolate it scientifically. We are sure . . . I can reveal to you that we became most certain when – during those times when she

seemed recovering, improved – your name was mentioned to her, or in her presence – and there was marked change every time in the patient – she fell back at once into serious remission.'

'My God.'

'It's true, M'sieur. I tell you this with no wish to dismay you, but to do all I can to assure protection for the Mademoiselle Ducelle. She asked me to deliver to you this message: please do not try to see her again. She does not wish to see you. To her request, I add my own professional advice – for whatever it is worth – your presence is certainly deleterious to her – almost as if it somehow delays her recovery. If you wished genuinely to do her a favour, you would stay away from her M'sieur. You would give her an opportunity to recover from this traumatic experience . . . .'

Talking with Dr Hassan Bey, I made one final decision concerning my career. From the Isthmus of Suez, I went across country and called upon Lord Stoppard at the British Embassy in Cairo.

The rotund nobleman greeted me with unaccustomed warmth and pleasure. I had no wait at all in his anteroom.

At every opportunity, Stoppard addressed me as Lord Anthony. At first, I jokingly replied, then growing slightly bored, I reminded him that he'd always called me 'Tony'. But, as I said this, I realised I was wrong again. Stoppard always called me 'Hamilton', kind of letting the name glide down along the patrician bridge of his pink nose.

I grinned inwardly. Now, since Stoppard believed me to be a confrere of the Prime Minister himself, with access to Downing Street and a nodding acquaintance at Buckingham Palace, his attitude revolved 180 oily degrees from condescension to a fawning attentiveness to my every utterance.

He wondered, for example, had I been provided some privy information about Disraeli's passionate interest in the Suez, and had I acted upon that?

I didn't bother to formulate a reasonable answer to this. He didn't want reasonable answers. He wanted the opportunity to ingratiate himself with those in authority. I

let him believe he had this and for forty fawning minutes he was a happy foreign service man getting an inner glimpse at things the way they were 'back home'.

It was only when I was ready to conclude my call that I let him see how he had wasted his flattery. I handed him a sealed letter and said, 'I'll appreciate your acting upon this, sir, as soon as it is conveniently possible.'

I walked out smiling, while the Lord's fat jaw was still agape.

At precisely noon on the 17th, the French Imperial Yacht, *l'Aigle*, steamed into the ship-clogged harbour at Port Said and progressed regally to her appointed place at the centre of everything.

From the Vicomte De Lesseps I learned that the Emperor and his lady Eugenie had arrived in Egypt a week before. They had been quartered in a special chalet built for the royal couple at the foot of the Great Pyramids. With his taste for the dramatic, De Lesseps said, Ismael had seen to it that the chalet was illumined constantly by magnesium flares, ignited at intervals along the splendid ten-mile avenue that led from the ancient wonder into Cairo.

From the *Mahroussieh* we watched *l'Aigle* steam past the other vessels at the mouth of the clamorous anchorage. As the yacht entered the port, the deafening, brilliant salute began, an unequalled display of fireworks and explosives. Thunderous cannonades continued unabated. Smoke wreathed and settled so heavily that at times parts of the roadstead lay obscured.

Finally, the Captain was able to move his slender yacht aport of the *Mahroussieh*. The lusty cheering that rose from the flag-bedecked steamers lining the wharves intensified when these revellers were joined by grog-happy sailors clinging to the yards of the men-of-war. The chorus of acclaim crested when the natives crowding the shoreline at last caught a glimpse of the Empress Eugenie, still extravagantly admired abroad though her husband's regime was hated, and still regally and youthfully beautiful at forty-three.

*L'Aigle* passed just too far from the *Mahroussieh* for us

to discern facial features or expressions of the royal party. Yet my memory remains clear on two vivid impressions. First was the way Napoleon III crouched into himself, older than the Pyramid of Cheops, withdrawn and bored. And it seemed to me, the Empress Eugenie's gaze touched at the man beside me, and she smiled faintly across the black waters, almost conspiratorially.

I would have doubted this, as I said, because of the distance between the two vessels, except that De Lesseps bowed slightly, and touched at the end of his moustache, nodding formally across that wailing pandemonium.

When, about three hours later, De Lesseps and I were ushered into the Empress Eugenie's private salon aboard the yacht *l'Aigle*, the Empress came up lightly from her royal chair and hurried down the carpeted steps, her arms extended.

De Lesseps held her gently for a moment. Watching them, I did not see them as lovers, even knowing all that I did. He appeared more like an affectionate bear of an uncle. It is true, however, that she clung to him with some fierceness revealed in the grip of her fingers.

Even as she extended her left hand to me and clung with it to my fingers, she was crying, 'Oh, my dearest Fernando. You have set my world up right again. The masses of Paris have stopped hating poor Napoleon to adore you – and their approval redounds to our administration.'

'You deserve it, dearest Eugenie,' he said. 'You went through hell with me, every step.'

'Yes, I did, didn't I?' Eugenie said brightly. 'I was faithful, wasn't I, Fernando? And at great cost.'

'At great cost, dearest lady. Always I asked too much, and always you responded generously.'

She gave me a faint, arch smile and tapped lightly at De Lesseps' cheek. 'I'd have been much more generous, if you'd have let me,' she teased. 'I would have been beside you – if you would have let me.'

'We had our destiny, dearest one. Both of us.'

She sighed and then, after a moment, smiled again. 'But now the terrible fight is over. We have won, Fernando, we

can enjoy the fruits of our long sacrifice.'

De Lesseps smiled and kissed her lightly. And again, I felt as if he were the condescending uncle and that she was not the Empress of France, but a spoiled niece. 'None but you and I will ever know how much you gave – how great is your contribution to the building of this canal. It should stand as a monument to your greatness, your highness.'

'You talk like a history book Fernando.'

'He always did,' I said.

Again she tried to be more intimate with the Vicomte. 'Not all the time. Sometimes – alone with me – he would forget what an important personage he was . . . At those times Fernando was quite human – well, almost human.'

'I regret that I ever disappointed you, your highness.'

'Oh, Fernando, what a terrible thing to say. Of course, never. You were never less than exquisite. That is why I am so happy to have you with me again.'

De Lesseps smiled and shook his head. 'I am afraid you count on too much, dearest cousin. You forget the formal demands of this hour – on both of us.'

'You don't want me,' she pouted.

'Dearest Eugenie.' De Lesseps touched her cheek with the back of his hand. 'You know better, just as you know we belong to history at this moment. While we stand here, I am keeping heads of great states waiting.'

She continued to hold on to my hand as De Lesseps took his leave and hurried away. She sighed and smiled at me. 'I wanted you to stay for a moment, Tony, though, like Fernando, I am past due at some foolish state function, as likely you are . . . But they forgive me my tardiness . . . They call it part of my charm.'

'Your great charm,' I said. 'No man would regret waiting for you, Empress.'

'Isn't it funny?' she said. 'I always believed you and I would be lovers, Tony.'

'I find it hard to believe you gave me that much thought, your highness.'

'Well, that's where you would be wrong. You were in my fantasies – in many of them . . . Oh, I knew how badly you wanted me. As badly as I wanted you – when we were both

young and helpless against our fates. But I never forgot you.'

'You are most kind.'

'And now I come to the moment when I must express my gratitude to you. Without your great efforts on behalf of the canal, England may never have come to our aid, Tony.'

'I didn't do that much, highness. I don't want to take too much credit. Disraeli always favoured the canal.'

'You provided the ammunition he needed. How thrilled you must have been to sit in the gallery at Parliament and hear the Prime Minister speak your words in reversing the policy of a nation. What a magnificent thing.'

I nodded and smiled. 'Yes, I cannot deny a great thrill. Next to this moment, that was the most exciting of my life.'

'How sweet of you. But it is not this moment that has meaning. As you know, *l'Aigle* will head the procession through the canal to Suez.'

'Nothing could be more fitting, highness.'

'Yes. But you're not listening, Tony. I want you aboard *l'Aigle*. As my guest. My most honoured guest. We will have many hours to ourselves . . . Napoleon will not accompany us on the trip. With more pressing matters at hand, he has chosen to remain in Cairo, where, with his ministers, he will conduct the affairs of State. Also, he will be under heavier guard than he feels will be possible to him aboard the yacht in a narrow channel . . . Poor dear . . . there have been so many threats upon his life . . . he trusts almost no one any more.'

'I am sorry, highness.'

She was instantly her old laughing self. 'Why should you be sorry? It makes it all so perfect for us – for you and me – after all these years. You and I shall lead the stuffy procession through the canal, Tony – and watch it all from my stateroom!' She laughed like a young girl.

I stared at her. I knew in my own heart that if De Lesseps had not gone away, leaving the Empress to history, I'd never have received this smiling invitation into her boudoir. But I had been invited. I had finally been given the one prize I'd dreamed of forever. I could have her, the most exciting woman of the century, I could have her in her own scented

bed. I'd have walked barefoot across glass, I would have smilingly killed, I would have betrayed my sainted mother for just this opportunity.

I hesitated so long that the smile seeped from about her lovely, voluptuous mouth. 'What's the matter, Tony?'

I laughed. 'Well, a man doesn't realise the dream of a lifetime casually.'

She smiled. 'You are pleased, then?'

'More than pleased. Honoured. Twice honoured. Wildly, madly, gaily honoured. But I have that terrible feeling, highness, that I have been petitioned by mistake.'

'Mistake?'

I smiled. 'I still recall most vividly, your highness, your telling me that only men of achievement aroused your interest. I am afraid I am not yet that man of destiny worthy of your attention – '

'Without you, England may never have come to our aid, dear Tony. Your own country has seen fit to knight you . . . You can be . . . do . . . whatever you want.'

'But that's what I am trying to say, your highness. I'll never be your heroic conqueror. If I gave my nation a small nudge towards its obligation, that is well. But I shall do no more. I have left my letter of resignation with the foreign service. When these ceremonies are concluded, I shall be an ordinary, private citizen again. Very private. Very ordinary.'

She sighed and then smiled. 'I shall miss you, Tony.'

'And I you, highness. But I shall have you in all my dreams – as I always have.'

'Where will you go? What will you do?' she said.

I smiled, shook my head, then I took the Empress in my arms and kissed her . . . goodbye.

When I entered Oriana's hospital room, she turned her face to the wall.

'I can only stay a moment,' I said, making my voice sound as if I spoke these words to reassure her. Our unpleasant parting would not be prolonged.

I saw the faint shudder that fled through her emaciated body. After a long time, she said, 'Where will you go?'

I gazed down at her. She was so thin, so pale, only her rich hair retained its old bright lustre. 'I'm not sure yet.'

'I . . . hope you will be happy, Tony.' She turned back from the wall and looked up at me. Her huge eyes were brimmed with tears.

I smiled. 'I hope I will too . . . But, of course, that's not up to me, is it?'

She frowned faintly and sighed. 'You must be happy,' she said. 'You have done so much – for others. For all others. Even when they vilified you – and wrongly accused you . . . The Moslems have a name for men like you. You are a Ghazi.'

'I'm afraid a Ghazi excels at extinction of infidels.'

'No. He's a champion warrior first. That's what you are. Like my dearest Vicomte De Lesseps, you don't know, either, how to stop fighting. And infidels? Who more than you overcame all who had no faith in you?'

'All?'

'I can never tell you how deeply I regret the evil I said to you, the evil I did to you – and the evil I thought of you – even when I knew that you had saved my life.'

'Does this mean then that you have forgiven me?'

'Forgiven?' She bit at her lip in anguish. 'Oh, it is you who can never forgive me. I know that. I accept that.'

I shook my head. 'But I have nothing to forgive. You were true to your ideals – you despised your enemies who opposed those ideals – and you counted me among those enemies.'

'Falsely . . . Oh, I'm sick with shame . . . But it does not matter any more, does it?'

'No.'

She winced and seemed to cringe upon the white sheets of the cot, withdrawing. She forced her voice to be light. 'You'll go back to some – some exotic, faraway place.'

'No. I'm through with all that. I'm not in the service any more.'

'But it was your life.'

'I *thought* it was my life. I used my endless travel as an excuse for never marrying, never settling down in one place. I finally realised, I never married for a far better reason . . .

I never wanted to marry – until I met you.'

'You need not be kind – '

'I'm not kind. I've come to tell you. I know you've always dreamed of a home, a permanent address, window curtains and flower beds and picket fences – the whole dreadful package.'

She smiled in spite of herself. 'Yes. The whole dreadful package . . . We both had our dreams, Tony. It's just that they were never the same dream.'

'Well, now they can be.'

'Oh, no.' She turned her face away, closing her eyes tightly.

'Oh, yes. I've given up travelling across the globe. And a puny sacrifice it is . . . . If you'll have me, we'll find a place – maybe with thatch roofing and picket gate – '

She shivered, shaking her head. 'Oh, even if we could, you'd hate it so – the whole dreadful package – '

'Very likely. But with you there, I shall want nothing more.'

She was silent for a long time, blinking away tears. 'I know you are trying to be nice. We both know how impossible all this is. You – a wanderer. Me – an invalid for life . . . You see, the doctors have told me the truth too. I'll never walk again.'

'There are other things besides walking. You'll see.'

She wept suddenly. 'A burden? Do you think I would let myself be a helpless burden on you who loves freedom above all else – ?'

'Above all else, dearest Oriana, except you. Without you, there is no freedom. There is nothing.'

'Oh, my dearest Tony. I do love you. I have loved you forever. But I could not burden you like that . . . You know it's true – only a miracle will make me walk again.'

I sank beside her and took her in my arms. 'Then we'll look for that miracle. Together. And whether we find it or not, that doesn't really matter does it? Because we shall have what does matter. We'll have each other. And we'll go looking for that miracle. Together. Good Lord, what more can we ask?'